

Toxic Communication in Workplace: Exploring its Effects and Ways to Handle it

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ABSTRACT

Difficult and toxic communication in workplace leads to trauma which in turn contributes to increase in stress-level and anxiety. More than often we find situations of such difficult and toxic communication especially during conflicts at the workplace. These may result in deleterious effects on the victims- right from stress-disorder, anxiety disorder, lowering of dignity, humiliation, low self-esteem and dysfunctional relationships with peers. Left unattended, a continuous ecosystem of toxic communication may lead to complete breakdown of relationships, lower productivity of the employees, and increase in trust deficit and hamper any efforts of team building. This paper is based on interviews of television journalists from different news channels on the impact of toxic communication in the workplace and the need to explore the possible coping strategies to deal with such a difficult communication ecosystem.

Keywords: Toxic communication, workplace trauma

A healthy communication ecosystem is an important pillar for an organization's well-being. An ecosystem of poor and toxic communication can have deleterious effect on the performance of the employees and leads to trauma and conditions of stress. Goutam (2013) talks about how communication breakdown and gaps in communication makes it difficult for employees to achieve goals. Goutam talks about how problems in communication leads to misunderstanding and confusion. A dysfunctional communication architecture leads to conflicts which mostly ends up in having deleterious effect in the overall health of an organization. For instance, Cloke and Goldsmith (2005) talks of how such conflicts results in organizations having to pay heavy price like 'litigation, strikes, reduced productivity, poor morale, wasted time

and resources, dysfunctional relationships with colleagues, competing departments, gossip and rumours and reduced opportunities for teamwork'.

In situations of conflict, the conflicting parties are likely to end up saying things or act through their gestures which they may not actually mean. The conflicting parties end up altercating at a very surface level and never attempt to go deeper and communicate honestly on what they really think and feel. Each of the conflicting parties would seldom attempt to speak from their heart; instead they might attempt to show their abrasive self.

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Further, when individuals or groups in an organization are engaged in conflict and in situations of dysfunctional communication, emotions are likely to become strong and overwhelming. In such a situation, most individuals could lack the skill to communicate honestly and empathetically with others. There are possibilities of both the conflicting parties becoming aggressive, judgmental, hypercritical, and apathetic. Cloke and Goldsmith (2005) explains this situation aptly as they point out, "We have not known how to temper our anger with compassion, how to listen to our opponent's pain when we were being criticized, how to discover what caused our opponents to act as they did, and how to take responsibility for our own miscommunications and conflicts. We have failed to find ways of working collaboratively with our opponents to find solutions to our problems."

In order to understand the effect of toxic and difficult communication in the workplace, the authors did a limited study of 25 television journalists on how such communication affects them and their well-being. Through a questionnaire that was qualitative in orientation, the journalists were interviewed in-depth to understand their perspectives and possible ideas on how to cope with toxic and difficult communication at workplace. The interviews focused on different forms of toxic communication and its effects on the journalists. The Convenience Sampling Method was used; the journalists in the known circle of the authors were interviewed. At the request of those interviewed, the identities have been withheld and names used in the paper are not the real names.

While the overarching goal was to capture the effect of toxic and difficult communication, the aim was also to explore the different coping strategies. The thrust was also to explore a framework of organizational communication architecture which could help in encouraging a harmonious working environment.

The Study

An important findings of the study point out how continuation of toxic and difficult communication

in the workplace leads to increasing unhappiness and uneasiness amongst the journalists. They talked of issues of anxiety and how perplexed they were while interacting with people who indulged in toxic communication. Many of those who were interviewed talked about how their creativity were affected due to toxic communication ecosystem.

Ajeetha, one of those who was interviewed explained, "It is paradoxical that we are in the business of effective communication; on how we can communicate news and stories to the public most effectively, but toxic communication in office tears away our creativity." She talked about the high spirits that are generated when she does a good human interest story but how at the same time toxic communication in the workplace contributes to the destruction of the positive spirit. "This makes us genuinely unhappy," she added.

Linked to this aspect of unhappiness and lowering of positive spirits, is the use of toxic communication by seniors to dominate juniors. "It is all about power relationships when our seniors try to show superiority over us," points out Asmit, who joined his news channel just six months back. Many times, the journalists said, words are use selectively to show them in poor light. Also there are situations when certain words and language are used for humiliating others. At least half of the journalists interviewed talked extensively of humiliating language used in the workplace and how it affects them. The worse affected talked about such humiliation plunged them to major depression and states of anxiety.

Along with the forms of toxic communication discussed so far, the study was able to list various other types of communication which led to stressful conditions amongst the journalists. These included: (a) frequent criticism and use of blame game; (b) how extreme work pressure led to low tolerance while communicating; (c) overbearing nonverbal communication; (d) use of threatening and rude language; (e) poor listening skills; (f) use of sexist language; (g) name calling especially by seniors.

Bipra, a junior news journalist talked about frequent use of sexist language by her seniors. "There are

not many avenues where we can expect to get fair hearing in situations of sexist overtones by seniors," she stressed, "We are left to fend for ourselves. We have to develop our own strategy on how to draw the line and how to react. Such overtone leads to serious loss of self-esteem, deep frustration and a feeling of hopelessness." She talked about a traumatic experience of a colleague who decided to quit after being unable to cope up with the toxic situation and frequent showdown with her senior, who kept on using sexist language.

Sanchita, another journalist talked of the patriarchal mindset which female journalists have to encounter in the workplace. "The tone and tenor of language often used are aimed at conveying on how inferior we are in comparisons to our male counterpart," she added. There was another dimension of office politics which the respondents talked about which involved gender bias.

Many of the journalists said the extreme work pressures were making them intolerant. Charles, a father of two children talked about poor work-life balance. "Forget about me-time, there are no time for the family. It leads to frustration and a feeling of not being able to do anything for the family. However, due to this intolerance seeps into the way we communicate, whether with colleagues or with our family members." In this context, Chetty (2021) notes, "The complexities in communication are generally the direct result of ineffective communication techniques such as inappropriate medium, poor message conceptualization or general lack of trust. The prevalence of all such aspects generally gives rise to poor output and stress leading to a poor work-life balance."

All of those interviewed were concerned at how a dysfunctional communication ecosystem and excessive stressful work environment was leading to skewed work-life balance. Another journalist, Saleha talked about how unhealthy communication ecosystem contributed to her unnecessarily screaming and shouting at her daughters. "Many times, I feel I carry the office trauma to create trauma in my house," she quipped.

Another major concern shared by the journalists was the frequent blame game and criticisms. "This is again due to the pressure cooker environment in which we work, when we do not know on how to react, we start blaming and screaming at our colleagues," Ajeetha acknowledged. Unconsciously, we tend to scream using inappropriate words that spoils relationships, she added.

One major ill-effects of toxic communication is increasing trust deficit amongst colleagues. Lack of trust amongst employees affects team-work and coordination. "Unhealthy communication leads to further toxic communication and continued trust deficit," observed Rajat, a mid-career television journalist. He added on how toxic communication leads to generation of negative energy not only amongst individuals but amongst team members also.

Shefali, a senior news anchor had an important observation to make. She pointed out, "Collaborative work and teambuilding is key to producing effective programmes and greater engagement with the audience. However, experience suggests that collaboration and communication go hand in hand. If there is poor or unhealthy communication, it is collaboration and team-building which suffers."

An important form of toxic communication that is prevalent in passive-aggressive communication. All the 25 journalists who were interviewed for the study talked about the passive-aggressive communication, which is essentially expressing anger in subtle and indirect ways. They explained how the passive-aggressive communication leaves individuals feel powerless and trapped. "It festers resentments that further damage the individual's wellbeing and capacity to communicate," they stressed.

The study explored the different ways in which passive-aggressive communicators communicated. Many of them deny that they are angry or there is a problem; they are in a state of self-denial. Then are instances when such communicators indulge in settling scores and use ways and means to

get even. They can use blackmailing techniques or sabotage to hurt another person. A frequent passive-aggressive communication form, according to those who were interviewed was contradictory behaviors of colleagues. Such people at the surface looks very helpful and cooperative but their action is totally contradictory and hurting. Use of sarcasm while communication was another common form of passive-aggressive communication. "Sarcastic statements in the workplace makes you frustrated and hurt," underlined Shefali, "The tone and tenor of such people ensures you have a bad day in office. There are elements of masked insult which is excoriatingly painful." According to the respondents, passive-aggressive communication actually leads to more conflicts and mistrust as it prevents honest and open communication between those in dispute.

The study revealed how the wide forms of toxic and unhealthy communication leads to decline in empathetic connections amongst colleagues, widening of trust deficit, decrease in respect and understanding amongst peers and possible disconnect between those involved in such types of communication. While all these leads to lowering of self-esteem and confidence, it contributes to trauma and stress. In extreme situations, there are many who think it is better to quit as they can't take it anymore.

Possible Solutions

Notwithstanding the ill-effects and problems arising out of toxic and unhealthy communication in the workplace, most of the journalists who were interviewed said they were adopting different strategies to cope with the trauma and stress. Some have been taking training in mindful practices which they said helped in enhancing their inner resilience and self-awareness, deal with emotional exhaustion and help in handling toxic communication. There were some who said they were now used to these situations of toxic communication ecosystem and it did not bother them much. In spite of extreme work pressures, there were some who took to volunteerism and altruistic activities which helped them remain positive.

Ajeetha talking on the ways to enhance inner resilience observed, "It is an issue of bread and butter. Just because of unhealthy communication in the workplace, we can't quit and go. We must learn the techniques to maneuver our way. With experience, we are now prepared to handle difficult traumatic situations. In fact, every time we face such situations, we are better equipped and prepared for the next difficult situation." This observation of Ajeetha is amplified by Cloke and Goldsmith (2005) who noted, "In most workplaces, employees learn to accept a level of humiliation, abuse, superficiality, and unresolved conflict simply in order to keep their jobs."

An important dimension of the proposed framework which the journalists reflected upon was on how to change the culture and context of a conflict situation which cropped up due to dysfunctional communication. It was important to discover the meaning of the conflict for all the conflicting parties in the organization. The journalists felt it was important to increase awareness of the underlying reasons of the dispute. Self-denial was not a solution, they underlined.

An important dimension of a possible communication framework in situations of unhealthy or toxic communication was the inability of individuals to search beneath the surface. Most of the people do not make efforts to embark upon critical reflection or unearth hidden meanings. In conflict situations, it was felt there were subterranean fears, vested interests, strong emotions desires, and histories which explained the reasons of the difficult conversations. In fact, these actually can become significant sources of resolutions and conflict transformation.

In this backdrop, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, in the Art of Living had so aptly explained:

"Every difficulty in life presents us with an opportunity to turn inward and to invoke our own submerged inner resources. The trials we endure can and should introduce us to our strengths...Dig deeply. You possess strengths you might not realize you have. Find the right one. Use it."

CONCLUSION

The study tried to explore the different forms of toxic and unhealthy communication in workplace which television journalists face. However, they find different innovative ways to deal with such difficult communication ecosystem and build their inner resilience. An important recommendation which emerged out of the study was the urgent need of the management to incorporate, assimilate and encourage healthy communication strategies so that team-building and collaborative work can be promoted and it contributes to the overall well-being of the employees.

An important direction in this regard could be to introduce nonviolent communication as a strategy in the overall communication ecosystem of the workplace. Both journalists and the management could be exposed to the different dimensions and elements of nonviolent communication so that its use can help in contributing to reduction of stress.

By using the strategies of nonviolent communication, organizations can develop a culture of dialogues. Unfortunately, whether in homes or institutions, the spirit of dialogues is increasing becoming rare. Openness and honesty in communication could be important principles in the dialogue process.

Another important dimension of nonviolent communication that needs to be assimilated in organizational architecture is the habit of listening. Again, hierarchical relationships highlights the lack of listening skills; senior not ready to listen to junior was the usual norm.

Conflicts due to lack or dysfunctional communication will always be there. But when organizations are able to ensure a nonviolent communication architecture, there can be spaces for constructive negotiation and mediation. A culture of negotiation and mediation can be a powerful strategy for transformation of conflicts.

To conclude, it would be pertinent to quote the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh from his book, *The Art of Communicating*. He says, "We tend to think of nourishment only as what we take in through our mouths, but what we consume with our eyes, our ears, our noses, our tongues, and our bodies is also food. The conversations going on around us, and those we participate in, are also food. Are we consuming and creating the kind of food that is healthy for us and helps us grow? When we say something that nourishes us and uplifts the people around us, we are feeding love and compassion. When we speak and act in a way that causes tension and anger, we are nourishing violence and suffering."

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