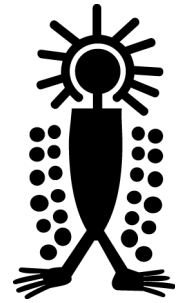**Michele Jackman**

Homeopathic Remedies for Team Toxicity

Teaming is a natural activity among coworkers who try to solve a problem or create a better way to get things done. Teams form spontaneously, without management prodding or specific direction, when they identify a common goal, define operating rules, develop a winning strategy, and assign roles to make sure it happens. Anything that stalls or impedes this process is a toxic situation, one that can derive from people, issues, or even the teaming process itself. The term "toxin" is generally defined as a harmful, destructive, or even deadly substance or process. Toxins possess a structure and a pattern of attack, and are secreted—in this case by a team. In terms of teamwork, this means that a person's behavior or a team's process can kill motivation and undermine a leader's or member's ability to fix it. Even in healthy organizations, teams encounter toxins that challenge their members to create an appropriate antitoxin that will get the team back on track.

Those teams that succeed best at combating toxins are the ones that share responsibility for the team's performance among all members. Upward-coaching is a key practice in such teams. So the techniques that follow will be of use to you even if you aren't your team's designated leader, and should be shared with the person who is.

THE FIVE MAJOR TOXINS THAT CAUSE TEAM TOXICITY

Based on my experiences observing hundreds of teams, I've isolated five major sources that can foster a potentially toxic team environment:

1. Too much frenzied activity, without clear focus or purpose, results in wasted energy.

2. High frustration levels cause friction among team members.

3. Fragmented or poorly coordinated procedures hinder task accomplishment.

4. Unclear roles cause especially poor accountability for consulting with and informing others of significant events or failures.

> **Appropriate countermeasures can prevent many toxins from developing.**

5. Continuous and repeated exposure to failure and negative feedback undermines team members' confidence and capabilities.

Ironically, an antitoxin or solution emerges from the same substance or process that causes the toxin. But before we can develop the appropriate antitoxin, we must first acknowledge that we are sick. In terms of illness, a fever sends a signal; in teaming, someone, upon encountering a toxin, needs to take a step back, laugh, say "aha," then take action. The approach I advocate is a homeopathic one that does not require radical surgery. That's the good news. Very straightforward and clear responses can reverse toxicity. Better still, adopting the appropriate countermeasures can prevent many toxins from ever developing.

PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

Preventing the toxins in the first place is the safest, most effective way to deal with them. You can significantly improve your teams' effectiveness and emotional resilience by preventing your people from becoming toxic.

1. Provide adequate information and adequate access to it to minimize or eliminate frenzy. If the

"wrong things are secret," the team may go berserk getting all kinds of information it doesn't need or be forced to operate in the dark. People get toxic without clear information about goals and targets.

2. Make sure people have the authority and permission to decide things after getting input from others. Avoid making every decision a time-con-

> **Avoid making every decision a time-consuming, everyone-must-agree one.**

suming, everyone-must-agree one. Otherwise, you create a great deal of frustration for the real expert on the team, who feels discounted or ignored.

3. As a leader, your role is to make sure team members have the tools, resources, and access to co-workers, vendors, and subcontractors needed to solve problems. Leaders prevent their people from becoming toxic by making sure they can do their jobs with minimal interference from unnecessary meetings and micromanagement. Further, you must intervene to manage toxins when team members show the first sign of being affected by any of them. If others don't perform, you must act quickly to restore team handoffs. You should not be second-guessing team members' technical decisions because doing so undermines confidence and motivation.

4. Ensure that peer pressure focuses on accountability to consult, inform, and carry out your agreements in a timely manner. Insist that if rules and roles aren't clear they must be changed. For example, when a person cannot perform, they must tell their team and renegotiate outcomes and roles. They *don't* miss timelines.

5. Ensure that everyone really supports each other with appropriate and accurate feedback that others can hear and act upon. Judging, behind-the-back gossip, and blaming are counterproductive and inject anger and cynicism into the workflow that destroy team trust and commitments.

INJECTING ANTITOXINS

Despite your best efforts, it's likely that sooner or later toxicity will creep into your development teams. To wake people up, I sometimes create more toxic symptoms to increase my clients' awareness of what's going on. For example, if people are in denial about

their frustrations, I make them draft a frustrations list and review it. This sometimes evokes a cynical, "Here we go again" response. But this time I burn through their frustration by staying with it until they develop clear rules for working together on the project. Increasing perception of the symptoms helps the team focus on the absurdity of their business-as-usual approach for avoiding confrontations. In the short term, I may have to create more frenzy, frustration, and fragmented activity so that the team can say "Stop!" and mean it. The real trick here is to make this process fun, not stressful. If people can see the absurdity and not personalize it, they can better confront their toxic behaviors.

Once people are aware of their toxic condition, I help them develop the appropriate antitoxins by reversing each source of the five toxins that accompany project chaos.

1. *Frenzy* reveals the need to clarify goals and desired results. The more confused the team, the more likely they will perform in a frenzied manner. Yet urgency to stop confusion may cause more conflict and move you away from the desired outcomes. Frenzy management consists of reminding people what the team does and does not want to see happen so that a clear boundary surrounds the project. This creates more energy, that, like a laser, can be focused on the need for clear, measurable outcomes. Examples might include, "We don't want this product to cost more to support than to build" or "we don't want to see this project result in the loss of good technical people." Such discussions help you avoid the next toxin: frustration.

2. *Frustration* reveals the need for clear rules, interpersonal contracts, and measures. As teams get moving, they normally experience or sense frenzy. But if the members or leaders don't respond to an individual's frustration, the team will become both personally and organizationally toxic. In the absence of clear rules, people make their own rules about completing work, being timely, informing or consulting one another, and communicating in general. This could frustrate many people outside the team and lead to serious conflicts. Members must keep revisiting project rules, company rules, market rules, and rules of all kinds to ensure they are not straying off course.

Yet too many rules that have nothing to do with project success will impede progress. Thus rules should be clear, simple, and relate directly to desired

outcomes. If a rule interferes with an outcome, that rule must be examined and reinterpreted in relation to the envisioned project. For example, normal working hours rules may need to be adapted. A flexible or intensive work schedule may require different hours, and different resources, such as keys to buildings for people who usually don't get them. Another example is bestowing purchasing power so that team members can buy tools critical to the project without having to go through normal request procedures.

3. *Fragmentation* and poor coordination result from inadequate charting or mapping of the project flow plan. If people on teams complete their task implementation without understanding each other's processes, several problems can ensue. One team I worked with had three schedules for completing the same project, and one person had 40 hours of assigned work for a single day because everyone needed that team member to do stuff at the same time. No one had performed integrated planning or charting. The team must define the simplest plan by sharing information and expectations early in its life, and must resolve conflicts and gaps revealed by comments like "How do we get that done? We don't have a process!"

4. *Fear* reveals the need for clearer roles and greater accountability. The most prevalent symptoms I encounter are the fear of revealing that people are assigned the wrong roles, or of confronting people who fail to fulfill their job roles. In the case of teaming, too much fear will lead to obsessions and irrational positions. If fear levels are high and widespread, poor accountability, not greater accountability, results. Fear exaggerates the assessment of problems so that people don't trust others or tell the truth. This phenomenon also causes project failure because it forces people into making more serious errors.

5. *Failures*, continuously recalled and relived, reveal a need to extract lessons learned and to celebrate small successes. Recurring criticisms about lost time, bad decisions, poor management, and serious bugs only serve to demoralize a team. Some teams refer to such meetings as "going for the premortems." Members know they will be criticized, humiliated, pressured, and challenged, and try everything to escape this emotional beating. Meetings should be used to "beat the drum," not the people. By creating a motivational rhythm and by emphasizing what we have investigated and learned, we

enhance the willingness of team members to share problems, not hide them. The antitoxin here is to provide more feedback on the value of failure and to avoid any finger-pointing or blame.

Too many meetings encourages an obsession with problems, which leads to creating and defining still more problems. So try implementing fewer and shorter meetings, thus letting team members use time to resolve issues and solve problems with key players—instead of just hearing about them for hours.

PROMOTING LONG-TERM HEALTH

By creating better goals and results definition, by clarifying and checking on rules, and by ensuring processes are well integrated and documented,

Fear reveals the need for clearer roles and greater accountability.

you can avoid workplace toxins. But the real secret to long-term project health lies in ensuring that every team member feels it appropriate to their role to expose toxic levels of team activity and to name a solution. You can ensure this by implementing five antitoxins:

♦ clear, mutually agreed-upon goals and results;
♦ clear rules that make sense;
♦ well-integrated and visible processes;
♦ increased accountability of all team members for uncovering and reporting toxic performance levels; and, most importantly,
♦ recognition and a positive approach to answering tough questions about the project's progress.

Continuous positive feedback about small successes is still the best medicine for keeping a team healthy and productive. What do healthy team members do when they see a toxin? They add it to the list of other toxins already caught or prevented before they caused bugs in the team's software. Such lists become an important part of the project's lessons learned. ❖

Michele Jackman regularly teaches University of California at Santa Cruz Extension courses in management, software engineering, and certificate programs. Her consulting practice focuses on team revitalization and health. She can be contacted at mjackmanEA@aol.com.