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Fear and Reaction to Toxic Leadership

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Your boss comes into the office, throws his jacket across the room, with brisk and determined steps, stomps his way across the floor, then announces to the room that he wants to see you in his office immediately. How do you respond? What thoughts begin racing across your mind as you recapture the event that just occurred. You see a visual replay in your mind of him coming through the door. As you walk through each step he took you try to figure out what you did now to receive such abrupt treatment. Your heart begins to palpitate and pound; your mind begins to swim with the pressure of your blood as it rushes to your head; the palms of your hands become sweaty and swollen; a shortness of breath begins in your chest; excitability begins to set in (anxiety); your thoughts race as you are stunned with the decision “Do I run, escape, stand up for myself, or just ignore him?” You are now in conflict. Is this a real conflict? Did you ‘do’ something to anger him? Or is it just your mere existence that has him sounding off with an annoying tone?

Everyone handles conflict in a different way. Some people handle it much better than others. But conflict, if it is truly determined to be such, can cause physical ailments, mental disappointments, and emotional trauma. Understanding our reaction to this conflict can enable an individual to control their reaction, calm the fear, and see it for what it is – a perception of trouble, not necessarily real, but troubling and occasionally debilitating. There are methods and processes that the human mind and body go through to resolve conflict that can be very helpful when shared with others.
Dr. Ax (1953) tells us that these physiological reactions are there to help us understand that we are having an emotional reaction to something external that is happening. He states “The quantitative patterns of these differentially influenced processes (such as blood pressure, heart rate, sweating, and skin temperature) provide a qualitative description of the emotional state at the physiological level” (p. 433).

Fanslow and LeDoux studied the brain and determined the hippocampus works to send a first response message to the amygdala, which in turn causes the “fight or flight” response in the emotion when fear is the object of the emotion (p. 231). The body sends reactions to the brain, which cause an individual to question their next move. Do I stay and defend myself, or leave because I am afraid?

Toxic leaders have a similar effect on their subordinates. The toxic leader can be considered that boss who is abusive, narcissistic, authoritarian, unpredictable, (Schmidt, 2008) and seems to get all the positive credit for the work that others accomplished. During a recent study I completed through interviews with human resource managers I discovered the process companies use to manage the toxicity in a work situation. Employees react in fear, express to human resource their perceived fear, and will even act out their fear.

Toxicity will typically show after about five months of working with this negative leader. Signs of toxicity appear within the company because employees will either: 1) complain continuously about a leader and the abusive treatment, 2) quit the company and move on to a new job, 3) take time off with stress leave, or 4) learn methods to work with the toxic leader. Human resource managers are then engaged with senior management, the toxic leader, and the subordinates to manage the conflict and calm the fear. The
answer then is to learn and teach methods of mediating conflict. Sharing basic lessons of communication, validation, and understanding needs and goals is the first step to resolving conflict, fear, and toxicity. The brain will then slow the anxiety to a minimal balance that can be used in a healthy fashion for discovering truth.

The human body is an amazing mechanism and an excellent example of how all parts of the body are connected and controlled by very basic foundations of the brain. This not only is an amazing synopsis of the value of communication, but also provides an example of how the reactions determine the correct response to a situation. In this scenario the reaction was fear. It would be important to further understand the process that determines fear so that people could better understand their fear. The object of protecting itself is only one of the many functions produced by this amazing muscle called the brain. As more information is gathered and scientists, psychologists, and psychiatrists continue to search together to understand its function, knowledge may lead to preventative methods for resolving conflict by predetermined abilities to watch for reactions that will yield to resolving conflict within and between subordinates and toxic leaders. The goal is to share knowledge about perceived reality versus real fear, and actions we can all take to determine the level of toxicity in our workplace.
References:

Amygdala and hippocampus,


