

T O X I C H U M A N S



Combatting Poisonous Leadership in Boards and Organisations

**M I C H A E L
J E N K I N S**

AUTHOR OF EXPERT HUMANS

TOXIC HUMANS

Michael Jenkins' Toxic Humans is a valuable contribution to the discourse on how to work towards more human and more effective organisations. It encourages reflection and suggests concrete ways to address dysfunctionality and toxic behaviour in organisations and to build cultures of trust and psychological safety - which is of increasing relevance given the world we live and work in.

—Aarti Kelshikar, *Author of How Women Work: Fitting in and Standing Out in Asia*

A timely wake up call for global boards and senior management to level up the leadership playing field. Brilliant management book on how to detox leadership and create better workplaces. Highly recommended insights by the leading global expert Michael Jenkins.

—Martin Roll, Business and Board Advisor,
Global Family Business and Family Office Expert,
Business School Educator

In Toxic Humans Michael Jenkins has laid bare some of the dysfunctional behaviour of leaders, past and present. He gives numerous examples of people who cause toxicity in the Boards and organisations they lead and uses his extensive experience to illustrate the different aspects of such toxicity. By analysing the evidence from a wide array of sources he has helped to explain how some CEOs have been able to get away with objectionable management styles for many years. He also has many practical suggestions for dealing with the difficult boss.

This book should be read by Board Members, whose role is critical in preventing an organisation from going toxic. It is also fascinating reading for anyone with an

interest in leadership and how some people occupy positions of power despite their poor interpersonal skills. It answers the question “What is a Toxic Human?”, and does a thorough job of analysing the impact on others or “So What?”. Finally it proposes ways of minimising the damage caused by toxic leaders and readers who ask, “Now What?” will not be disappointed.

—Peter Thomson, Partner, FutureWork Forum

Work can be inspiring and productive, but when toxic humans are involved everybody loses – even the toxic boss or colleague. Michael Jenkins has done us a service with this thoughtful and detailed analysis of toxic personalities, how they reveal themselves – and what we might be able to do about them. Buy a copy for the toxic human in your life!

—Stefan Stern, former FT management columnist and
Visiting Professor in management practice at Bayes
Business School (formerly Cass), City,
University of London

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TOXIC HUMANS

Combatting Poisonous Leadership in
Boards and Organisations

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-977-2 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-974-1 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-976-5 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I would like to dedicate this book to my grandson Henry, a source of great joy for our family.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Jenkins was born, and spent his early years, in Malaysia. He graduated from Durham University in Chinese Studies followed by postgraduate studies in Japanese language, politics and economics at Nanzan University, Japan (supported by a scholarship from the Rotary Foundation for International Understanding) after which he worked for Toyota Motor Corporation for four years as a motor analyst in the Overseas Planning Department.

Returning to the United Kingdom in 1988, Michael worked at the University of Bath as the Director of the Foreign Languages Centre where he established and taught on the United Kingdom's first PG Diploma in Japanese/English/Japanese Interpreting and Translation. In 2001, after two years with INSEAD in France as Regional Director, Japan and Korea, Michael returned to Asia as Director of INSEAD Executive Education in Singapore. He subsequently took on the role of Managing Director of the Center for Creative Leadership Asia-Pacific and in 2009 he joined Roffey Park Institute in the United Kingdom as CEO. Moving back to Singapore, Michael joined the Human Capital Leadership Institute (HCLI) as CEO in July 2018 before moving to set up a new company, Expert Humans in April 2020. In July 2020, he joined the UK-based FutureWork Forum (which explores the working world of tomorrow) as a Partner.

The United Kingdom's *HR Magazine* named Michael as one of the United Kingdom's Most Influential Thinkers in Human Resources in 2013 and again in 2016. In 2023, Michael was included as one of the top three HR Influencers in Southeast Asia by *ETHRWorld* Southeast Asia's HR Influencers annual listing. Michael is a regular contributor at conferences in Singapore and abroad where he specialises in topics such as humanising the workplace, new thinking in leadership development, the Future of Work and sustainability.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of my Partner colleagues at the FutureWork Forum during the writing of *Toxic Humans*. I would also like to thank the VAB (Virtual Advisory Board) for giving me the chance to explore ideas with its members and for their generous and insightful feedback.

My sincere thanks to Helle Bank Jørgensen, John Barker and Sandra Guerra, for sharing their insights with me about people dynamics in a Board context together with Phaik Ai Choo and Shruti Swaroop, who shared their reflections on people interactions in organisations more broadly. Thank you to Alison Miles, David Fernández Esquivel, Dirk Verbruggen, Gareth Bibby, Jacques Schayes, Jill Davidson, Dr Kiran Chitta, Markus Keiper, Dr Robyn Wilson, Rudi Plettinx and Simon Miles for their kindness and generosity during the writing of this book.

In addition, I am truly indebted to the many brave people who shared their stories of toxicity in Boards and organisations with me: I am also immensely grateful to the many friends and colleagues who volunteered their valuable insights and comments.

I would especially like to thank my wife Joyce Jenkins for the many conversations and her thoughtful insights that helped shape the book. My heartfelt thanks also go to my daughter Maia, son Nat and sister Anna for their support and encouragement.

Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF THE TOXIC HUMANS

When I was writing my book about altruism, compassion and empathy in an environment of ongoing turbulence – *Expert Humans – Critical Leadership Skills for a Disrupted World* – the alarming degree of dysfunctionality in Boards and organisations I noticed and the disastrous impacts they had and continue to have – made me think about approaching the subject of how to create the conditions for more humane and human workplaces from a different perspective.

I had explored what it would take to create the conditions for more psychological safety in organisations and through doing this, I was confronted time and again by the reality of work life today, which is that too many people are suffering as a result of what we term ‘toxic’ or ‘poisonous’ leadership. As I started to reflect on where this toxicity comes from, it occurred to me that while toxicity exists at all levels and in all corners of organisations, it is the Board members and senior management who set the tone for the organisation and who have among their various responsibilities a duty of care to employees who are impacted by the culture that evolves on their watch. It was for this reason that I eventually decided to focus on toxicity in Boards and among senior leaders in organisations – and to start off by asking a trio of questions, namely what exactly are we looking at when we talk about toxicity, what are the implications of this toxicity in Boards and organisations and most critically, what can we do about it, assuming that we *can* do something about it?

We will explore these questions in due course.

And as we go on this exploration it is important to note that when we refer to ‘Toxic Humans’ we are referring to people who exhibit behaviours that harm or negatively impact other people. It’s a term that is growing in popularity, which suggests an increasing awareness – but we need to be alive to the dangers of labelling and our challenge is to try to get beneath the

surface of the term ‘Toxic Humans’ itself. I believe that people are inherently good but that various factors – such as upbringing, environment, systems, context and so on – result in the emergence of certain kinds of behaviour. These factors will be part of the focus of our upcoming exploration.

TOXICITY AROUND THE WORLD

My professional career to date has provided me with the opportunity to experience life in small, medium and large-scale enterprises across the world. This has underscored for me that toxicity transcends local, national and international boundaries. The fact that toxic leadership can show up in subtle and different ways in different cultures adds another layer of interest and complexity to the topic. In addition to working as a full-time employee in a number of different organisations, my work as a Japanese-English interpreter over a period of 10 years provided me with a window on the working lives of different people in different kinds of public, private and not-for-profit organisations – a ringside seat at meetings which were often characterised by breathtakingly cruel behaviour. Today, as a facilitator of leadership and organisational development programmes, I have the opportunity to test and explore assumptions and ideas about toxicity by working with people in a variety of different organisations and asking them about their experiences. So in *Toxic Humans* we will look at how people interact with toxic leaders and what effects these interactions have. We will work towards proposing a way forward that enables employees of organisations to manage and coexist with such toxicity as well as providing some thoughts on how we can contain, mitigate or reduce the worse effects of organisational toxicity. That sounds great, you may say, but isn’t toxic leadership something that has been around since the dawn of time, and shouldn’t we just settle for the easiest life possible – to keep our heads down and simply try to make the most of a less than ideal situation?

I think this is precisely the problem that we need to tackle: to press the stop button and say unequivocally, enough is enough.

Today there is a growing body of evidence that I will share in due course to suggest that toxic leadership is actually on the rise and that ignoring or tolerating it will result in even more broken lives, more broken societies, more

value destruction. One example right now: the UK business magazine *Management Today* cited findings published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* that ‘escaping a toxic workplace culture has now become the number one cause of employee resignations’ (22.02.2023). The study analysed 34 million online employees and more than 1.4 million Glassdoor reviews between April and September 2021 and found that toxic workplace culture was 10 times more likely to be the reason an employee would leave their company than their salary. From a Board perspective – where Board members are acutely aware of the role they play in monitoring risk to the organisation – such findings ought to be causing alarm bells to ring. In a world of turbulence, the danger posed by critical talent exiting and the spectre of damage to employer brand as news spreads about the toxicity of the culture – has got to be a reason to pay attention and to come up with an appropriate response.

The good news is that increasing numbers of people are recognising that it is possible to call out outrageous, toxic behaviour and to make progress on tackling it. The challenge that remains however is that people need support and encouragement to call out those often extremely powerful people, scary if not terrifying individuals, who are past masters of intimidation and bullying: they know just how to manipulate others, bend them to their will and leverage systemic weaknesses to further their own agenda. This is not easy, but we will hear stories of bravery later in *Toxic Humans* where ordinary working people went up against toxic leaders – and won.

I am part of an industry that has spent decades looking at the development of leaders in organisations large and small. Thankfully, as key players in the industry, enlightened and progressive business schools have started to evolve in ways that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago – which is to say they recognise completely that it is the *people in organisations* who should be centre stage *as human beings* – and not just cogs in the wheel – while those who lead them must be developed to be effective not just in terms of running a business or organisation, but in ways that ensure their people are cared for and thought about such that *they feel like they belong*. Hence the growing interest in recent years in psychological safety, the critical role of trust in organisational life and the power of learning and development: all of these things give meaning to work and come together, alongside purpose and values, to create a culture. They are intrinsically linked of course (psychological safety, trust and a learning culture) and so to fall short on even one of

them can make the difference between being sustainable as a business or organisation or eventually going to the wall.

So, during the course of *Toxic Humans*, we will explore some of the stories of toxic leaders (those leaders who display toxic behaviours) and the damage they have done to their organisations – and countries – and speak to people who have had the misfortune to have worked with or for them – or worse, have managed to get in their way as such individuals pursue power, self-aggrandisement and material benefit. At the same time, we will find that the most dangerously ‘toxic leaders’ are to be found not only in senior management teams but crucially on Boards as well. ‘A fish rots from the head down’ is a popular saying and so it is important that we examine the role that Board members play in contributing to the creation of poisonous or toxic leadership, given that such actions have a nasty habit of seeping into the rest of the body politic of the organisation.

I outlined in a recent article for the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) and their *Global Focus Special Supplement*, written by the Partners of the FutureWork Forum, that doing more to call out the toxic humans in organisations is long overdue. These individuals are the ones who shape dysfunctionality and normalise what we should all regard as unacceptable behaviour. They are the hardcore bullies, the narcissists and corporate psychopaths who for whatever reason make other people’s lives miserable. We need to learn to read the signs and be ready to act against them. Many toxic humans resist coaching: some might say they are individuals who are simply ‘un-coachable’, and their behaviour goes beyond what we might see as simply incivility. As the following excerpt suggests, I really wanted to press the alarm button about toxic behaviour by human beings in the workplace – because I believe it is vital that we do so:

They are the ones who use empathy in a negative, nefarious manner thanks to their ability to scent vulnerability in others (usually people who are different to them, gentler or unassuming). These Toxic Humans are the people whose emails, text messages and WhatsApp notifications cause our pulses to race and our throats to feel dry. Does this happen to you at work? Chances are you are the victim of a Toxic Human.

(Michael Jenkins: *The Rise of the Toxic Humans* in *Global Focus* magazine (2022))

COMBATTING POISONOUS OR TOXIC LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

History shows that toxic humans and toxic leaders thrive during periods of disruption and chaos, offering as they do simplistic answers to complex issues together with powerful, but unrealisable visions that capture the attention – and endorsement – of people anxious for certainty and ‘strong leadership’ in a turbulent world.

How indeed are we to combat them, especially in an era such as the one we are living through now?

So let’s go deeper by first asking: What exactly *is* a toxic human?

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WHAT ARE 'TOXIC HUMANS'?

For us to be able to strategise on how to tackle toxic humans effectively, we first have to define what we mean by the term 'Toxic Human'. In her 1996 book *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad*, the author and academic Marcia Lynn Whicker described three leadership styles: these were trustworthy, transitional and toxic. She goes on to define *toxic leaders* as follows:

A toxic leader is a person who has responsibility for a group of people or an organization, and who abuses the leader-follower relationship by leaving the group or organization in a worse condition than it was in.

(Marcia Lynn Whicker, 1996)

I think this offers a useful way to think about toxic leaders – especially the reference to the abuse of the leader-follower relationship. We will return to this later. The idea that toxic leaders leave things worse than they were before is something to which I think we can all relate: we are well aware, for instance, that human history has been scarred by the actions of numerous tyrannical rulers, dictators and politicians – from every corner of the globe. For many of us these people are something more than simply toxic leaders or toxic humans – they are monsters. They have murdered and plundered their way into our collective conscience, demonstrating behaviour that most of us would accept goes far beyond what we might characterise simply as 'toxicity'. The mere mention of Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot and Idi Amin Dada, immediately, fills us with revulsion as we connect these individuals with atrocious and unforgivable crimes against humanity. Would we have the same reaction at the mention of infamous captains of industry whose actions are reprehensible

but who are clearly in a different class of awfulness to the three individuals I have just mentioned? I don't think so. And while there are definitely politicians and business leaders in our world today who arouse strong negative feelings for many people – would we always label them toxic humans? We might actually be tempted to call them sociopaths and narcissists, may be even psychopaths – but as with any kind of attempt to categorise people, we need to take great care with respect to our terminology and characterisations of people. So it is with the term 'Toxic Humans'. In this book, we will use the term to denote people who display the kind of leadership that is poisonous for organisations and whose behaviour undermines, threatens or damages people. In her book *The Allure of Toxic Leaders – Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them* (2006), Jean Lipman-Blumen talked about toxic leaders consistently exhibiting toxic traits while routinely engaging in dysfunctional behaviour – and in an article in the *Ivey Business Journal* from 2005, she wrote:

...we can take as our working definition of toxic leaders those individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even the nations that they lead.

(Jean Lipman-Blumen, 2005)

Our task is to try to understand what makes toxic humans – toxic leaders – do the things they do and what, systemically, enables them to *get to do* the things they do. And this is why looking at toxic humans in history can give us some insights into how they came to be so infamous and through this, help us to establish what patterns of behaviour we might need to watch out for in the context of toxic leaders today. We might also gain a better understanding of what has shaped people and perhaps even feel motivated to consider an empathetic or even a forgiving response.

A HUNDRED YEARS OF TOXIC HUMANS IN ORGANISATIONS

As we look back after the last 100 years or so to assess the effect of toxic leaders, there is a discernible trend towards us noticing more – and being able to call out more – their behaviours and actions, something which gives us a