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# Toxic Decision Processes: A Study of Emotion and Organizational Decision Making

Sally Maitlis, Hakan Ozcelik
Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia, 2053 Main Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6T 1Z2
{sally.maitlis@sauder.ubc.ca, hakan.ozcelik@sauder.ubc.ca}

This paper addresses the role of emotion in organizational decision making. Grounding our research in the decision process literature, we introduce the concept of "toxic decision processes": organizational decision processes that generate widespread negative emotion in an organization through the recursive interplay of members' actions and negative emotions. We draw on a longitudinal, qualitative analysis of six toxic decision processes to develop a model that describes the three phases—inertia, detonation, and containment—through which these processes unfold. Each phase is characterized by distinctive sets of interactions among decision makers and other organizational members, and by emotions such as anxiety, fear, shame, anger, and embarrassment, that shape and are shaped by these interactions. We show that toxic decision processes are triggered by issues that are sensitive, ambiguous, and nonurgent and identify several mechanisms that connect actors' emotions and actions, over time creating a toxic decision process that leads to the cumulative buildup and diffusion of toxicity. These mechanisms include the construction of a "danger zone" around the issue that is avoided by all parties, the spread of negative emotion through processes of empathetic transmission and emotional contagion, and the suppression of widespread negative emotion that leads to the development of a volatile emotional context for future decision making. This study has important implications for the decision process literature, revealing how the different lenses through which decision making is usually viewed are connected by the emotionality that runs through each of them.

*Key words*: emotion; decision making; toxic

## Introduction

Organizational research has increasingly recognized the emotional nature of organizations and organizational life (e.g., Ashkanasy et al. 2002, Elsbach et al. 1998). We now widely accept organizations as "emotional arenas" (Fineman 1993, p. 9) and acknowledge the emotionally saturated nature of people's work experience (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). Even decision-making research, one of the most cognitively oriented domains of organizational behavior, shows a growing concern for the role of emotion (Forgas and George 2001, Schwarz 2000). The emotionality of organizational decision processes can be very subtle, as in many highly routinized decisions, while other issues provoke intensely emotional decision processes. Potential mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing, for instance, can have dramatic effects on how employees feel about themselves and their organizations; knowing this can have significant impact on the way these decisions are made (Brockner 1988).

Despite growing recognition of the inherent emotionality of decision making, research in the area has tended to take a fairly narrow approach. Most studies have focused on the individual level, examining how the choices a person makes are influenced by his or her emotions (e.g., Forgas and George 2001, Mellers 2000). Such research situates both emotions and decision processes in individuals and pays less attention to the possible collective, systemic, and dynamic properties of emotions. We probably know least of all about the dynamics of negative emotion in organizations, often prompted by decisions to downsize and restructure, as well as everyday issues, such as promotions and budget allocations (Frost 2003). Despite the prevalence of painful emotions, the organizational literature has tended to focus on employees' positive feelings at work (e.g., Staw et al. 1994, Wright and Staw 1999). Research to date has thus left us with a limited understanding of the dynamic and complex role of negative emotion in organizational decision processes.

This study addresses this issue by drawing on a two-year, qualitative study of decision making in three symphony orchestras. An ethnographic approach was used to examine the role of emotion in six decisions to "let go" a musician whose performance was no longer considered to be satisfactory. Drawing on our analysis of these decision processes, we introduce the concept of a "toxic decision process," which we define as a decision process that generates widespread negative emotion in an organization. We use the term "negative emotion" to describe intense unpleasant feelings, both experienced and expressed, such as fear, shame, apprehension, and anger (Diener et al. 1995). The concept of a toxic decision process thus connects high-intensity negative affect and decision making in organizations.

Based on our analysis of these toxic decision processes, we propose a model of emotion and action in organizations as deeply entwined and connected through a cyclical relationship that evolves recursively, over time. This model makes important contributions to our understanding of emotion in decision making and in organizational processes more generally. First, it shows how emotion affects organizational decision making, in particular documenting the ways in which individuals' emotions affect not only their own actions but also the emotions and actions of other organizational members. It also illuminates the systemic nature of emotions in organizations: Although individual people experienced and enacted the feelings described here, the connections between actions and emotions, and even the emotions themselves, emerge significantly from organizational roles and relationships. Finally, the model we develop shows how the combination of certain issues, actions, and reactions leads to the generation and widespread diffusion of negative emotion over time.

## Research on Emotion in Organizational Decision Making

### Organizational Decision Process Research

While emotion has been the subject of little direct examination in the organizational decision making literature, research on decision processes—how decisions are made—suggests that emotion can play an important role in decision making. Research in this area has been and continues to be oriented around three distinct perspectives on organizational decision making—as boundedly rational, rule driven, or political (Allison 1971; March 1994, 1997)—each of which raises important questions about the role of emotion.

From a boundedly rational perspective, decision making is seen as deriving from actors' preferences and their expectations about the consequences of choices they make. It assumes that although we cannot know all the available alternatives or be certain of our future preferences, decision making is nevertheless a choice-based process (March 1997). Clearly this model of decision making has a strongly cognitive emphasis, as actors strive to make rational choices, sifting through options to find a satisfactory solution. At the same time, however, it suggests that individuals are guided in their choices by estimates of the feelings they expect to experience once they have made their selection. The importance of emotions is thus implied in even this most rational construction of decision making. While this stream does not directly examine the role of emotion in decision processes, it raises questions about exactly how anticipatory emotions influence decision making and how post-choice emotions influence subsequent decisions.

The second perspective on decision making portrays decisions as bureaucratic and rule based, actors following rules or procedures that appear to fulfill their identities and seem appropriate to a given situation. March (1997), for example, argues that individuals in organizations often take actions that reflect their images of "proper" behavior, ignoring conscious preferences and instead making decisions on the basis of rules, routines, identities, and roles. While the role of emotion in decision processes in this perspective is again largely implicit, the identity-driven nature of action in these rule-based models suggests that emotion is likely to play an important part, guiding individuals to engage in behaviors that provide the positive emotions associated with identity-congruent experiences (Lazarus 1991). Again, though, we know very little about exactly how this occurs in an organizational decision making context.

The third stream of decision process research focuses on its political aspects, highlighting the conflicting interests that different parties bring to decision making and the processes in which they engage as these differences are negotiated (Pettigrew 1973). The image of decision making as a political game filled with conflict, tactics, unstable alliances, and "individualistic maneuverings" (Wilson 1982) suggests a context in which emotions are likely to play an important role. While political models contain an inherently emotional dimension, they have focused on the tactics and strategies actors use as they strive to ensure that their interests are met, paying less attention to the feelings that shape and lubricate these actions, the expressed emotions that accompany them, or the emotional reactions they provoke (Fineman 1993).

### Individual Decision-Making Research

Although our focus is on organizational decision processes, research on emotion in individual decision making has provided some important foundations. Early work by Vroom (1964) implicitly acknowledged the role of emotion, showing that a decision maker's preference among expected outcomes is influenced by the outcome "valence," or the individual's affective orientation toward an outcome. More recently, attribution theorists have shown that feelings such as concern and anger, evoked as a result of the attributions people make about others in need, influence decisions to engage in helping behavior (Meyer and Mulherin 1980, Weiner 1980). Other psychological research extends this work to show that people take the emotions they anticipate they will feel into account when making decisions (e.g., Mellers 2000, Schwarz 2000). These studies reveal that before making a decision, individuals anticipate the pleasure or regret they will experience with possible outcomes, which they take into account when choosing among alternatives (Zeelenberg 1999). Even more fundamentally, Damasio's (1994) research on patients with frontal lobe damage suggests not only that emotions and

decisions affect one another, but that decision making is not even possible without emotions.

Taken together, research on emotion and individual decision making establishes how emotion directly and indirectly drives many of the choices we make as well as shaping our postdecision reactions. These studies, however, examine discrete elements of the emotion–decision-making relationship and consider it only at the individual level; consequently, they are in danger of concealing the more complex interrelations that exist between emotion and decision-making activities, especially over time and in a social context (Brief 2001).

### Negative Emotions and Decision Processes

Our knowledge of emotion in organizations is perhaps most limited in the area of negative emotions, which have received very little research attention despite the critical role that they play in shaping the organizational order (Flam 1993, Lewis 2000). In her analysis of "greedy" organizations, Flam (1993) describes how workplaces generate emotions such as fear, embarrassment, shame, and guilt, which they use to buttress other control mechanisms. Observing managers who live in the constant shadow of social and economic uncertainty, she highlights the "endemic anxiety" they feel underneath their displays of enthusiasm. Frost (2003) regards feelings such as sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger as highly prevalent in organizational life. He introduces the concept of "toxicity" in organizations, discussing the negative emotions that develop as a result of everyday organizational activity and arguing that toxicity is generated when these feelings are handled in a harmful rather than healing way (Frost 2003, p. 12). We still understand relatively little, however, about how negative emotions may be transmitted in organizations (Staw et al. 1994) or about how toxicity may be generated or alleviated through specific organizational processes such as decision making.

The literature on organizational decision processes, individual decision making, and negative emotions in organizations sets the scene for the present study. Existing research on decision processes points to the importance of emotions but leaves open the question of exactly how they influence organizational decision processes and how the emotions evoked by certain decisions influence subsequent actions. Research on emotions in individual decision making shows that emotions determine many of the choices we make and shape our postdecision reactions but raises questions about how these relationships play out over time and in the social, political environment of organizations. Finally, research on negative emotion has highlighted its prevalence and importance in organizations but has failed to develop systematic theories of its role or how it interacts with organizational decision processes. The focus of this paper is thus the role of negative emotion as it plays out over time in organizational decision making.

## Method

This paper draws on data collected by one author as part of an ethnographic study of three British orchestras. The data discussed here were gathered on one issue that is common for all orchestras and arose in each of the three studied here, that of unsatisfactory player performance. This kind of sensitive issue is one especially well suited to an ethnographic approach, which allows close but relatively unobtrusive data collection in real time (Huy 2002). Six instances of the issue (two in each orchestra) took place during the time of the fieldwork. The decision processes associated with this issue were notable for their emotionality, which led to their close examination and, because of their generation of widespread negative emotion, to ultimately identify them as "toxic."

Our primary intent in this paper is to develop a process theory (Langley 1999, Mohr 1982) based on analysis of comparable examples of toxic decision processes. Seeking to tell a story about how toxicity may be generated in organizational decision making, our emphasis is on identifying the sequence of emotional states and decision actions that leads to toxicity. This approach contrasts with that of variance theories, which focus on predictor variables and variance in dependent variables (such as level of toxicity) (Mohr 1982). We did not, therefore, attempt to measure some absolute level of toxicity for each process or to quantitatively associate differences in processes with variation in toxicity level. However, by analyzing how aspects of the three different organizational contexts shaped the decision processes and toxicity generated in each orchestra, we were able to more clearly demonstrate how the decision process itself (rather than simply the issue to be decided) affected the generation of toxicity.

### Research Context

Britain has 13 permanent professional symphony orchestras, which are grouped into three categories based on their location and governance structure. All are of a comparable size (around 100 musicians) and undertake broadly similar activities, including concert giving, recording, and education and outreach work. Three orchestras, one from each category, served as the research sites for this study and are referred to here as the ASO, BSO, and CSO. They were matched in terms of their artistic and financial performance relative to others in their group at the start of the study period; each was regarded as a "mid-performer."

The issue of unsatisfactory player performance in these organizations offers an especially illuminating research context for the study of emotion. First, previous research has highlighted the emotive nature of decisions around performance assessment (Taylor et al. 1995); in orchestras, these decisions take on a special significance because of the role that musicians' professional identity plays in their self-identity (Levine and Levine 1996).

The centrality of professional identity to the conception of "self" has been found not only in music, but also in professions such as law, medicine, and science, where incumbents often derive considerable meaning about who they are from their professional identity (Wallace 1995, Zabusky and Barley 1997). When a professional's job competence—a musician's performing ability in this case—is questioned, it therefore presents a challenge to his or her identity at the most fundamental level—a very threatening and emotional experience (Lazarus 1991). A second reason to study unsatisfactory performance decisions in symphony orchestras relates to the processes of peer review and criticism often found in professional orchestras (Sternbach 1995). The great majority of orchestra members belong to one broad occupational group and are constantly performing in front of one another. This continuous social comparison is likely to mean that making and accepting decisions regarding unsatisfactory performance is especially difficult, adding further tension to the inherently delicate decision process. Thus, we see how decisions around this issue provide transparently observable instances of emotion-imbued decision processes, ideal for the development of theory on emotion and decision making (Eisenhardt 1989, Pettigrew 1990).

## Data Collection

Data collection was carried out using a range of qualitative methods, including interviews with orchestra managers, players, board members, and other stakeholders; observation of meetings, rehearsals, and the orchestras on tour; and extensive documentary analysis. In total, 120 formal interviews were conducted, with repeat interviews with key informants throughout the study period, in particular, the executive director and player representatives of each orchestra. These interviews were semistructured and became increasingly focused during the course of the fieldwork. In addition to the recorded and transcribed interviews, a large number of informal interviews with musicians and managers were also conducted, often taking place in buses, bars, and restaurants. While these generally covered similar areas to those listed above, they also provided opportunities to pick up on something that had just occurred (e.g., discussing with musicians over lunch what had just happened in a meeting) and to hear the views of a group of people talking together, which offered insight to certain group dynamics, such as manager-musician interactions. In addition to the interviews, 107 meetings were observed that included meetings of various different groups within each organization and meetings between orchestra leaders and those external to their organization. Throughout each meeting, as far as possible, what was said and by whom was noted verbatim.

## Data Analysis

*Stage* 1: *Narrative Construction.* In the first stage, one author developed narratives that chronicled the process of dealing with unsatisfactory player performance for each of the six instances of this issue that were observed (summaries are provided in Table 1). These were constructed by tracing through all the chronologically ordered raw data (interview transcripts, observation notes, archival documentation) to identify every time the issue dealing with unsatisfactory player performance arose and then selecting and ordering quotations from these data to describe the process. The narratives were thus composites made up of data from all three types of sources, each making an important contribution to the ability to understand the emotional dynamics of the decision processes.

*Stage* 2: *Coding Across Sources.* In the second stage, authors conducted open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) on the six narratives to identify the emotions in each decision process and the actions associated with them. Each author first separately noted each time a reference was made, for example, to how people felt or how they responded emotionally to the actions of another. Authors also identified actions in the decision process that were associated with these different emotional reactions. For example, in Decision 4, the authors identified musicians' angry outbursts as a significant expression of emotion. These outbursts and the feelings of anger and indignation that fueled them were described by several musicians and by the executive director in interviews. These feelings were also evidenced in a letter to the executive director that was written by the player's chair and signed by all the musicians, protesting what had happened. In coding the emotion, one author described it as "anger" and the other as "anger and indignation." After discussing the supporting evidence, the authors agreed to code this emotional expression as both anger and indignation. At this stage we sought to develop a comprehensive set of emotions, so an emotion was noted even if it was identified only once.

Then, tracing through the narrative for actions, we each separately identified the rushed and insensitive way in which decision makers had conveyed their decision as a key action. Musician interviewees made reference to the hasty letter sent to the target musician, and the executive director described in interview how his team had procrastinated over tackling the matter until it was too late to do anything other than send such a letter. Both musicians and decision makers clearly saw a connection between the way in which the action was taken and the emotional response of orchestra members. Going through this kind of coding process for each case ultimately led to chronologically ordered lists of the emotions found in each decision process and the actions that related to those emotions.

**Table 1 Toxic Decision Processes by Phase**

| Decision | Inertia | Detonation | Containment |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. ASO brass player | **8/93:** The principal conductor (PC) was unhappy with the player's performance and keen to begin formal procedure. Management (M) did not allow him to intervene and was itself apprehensive about doing so. No action was taken for more than two years. Some musicians and managers knew the PC's concerns and felt fearful and anxious about his intentions. Close colleagues of target musician described him as anxious and stressed.<br>**Target: E:** anxiety, stress, fear (S)<br>**Decision makers: E:** apprehension, anxiety; **A:** delay taking action (S)<br>**Others: E:** fear, anxiety; **A:** avoid involvement (S) | **12/95:** Under growing pressure, the executive director (ED) sent the player a letter informing him that he must reaudition. **12/95:** The player, ashamed and upset, went off sick. **12/95:** There were several angry outcries from the players' committee and others, who insisted the musician was being treated unfairly.<br>**Target: E:** shame (S)<br>**Decision makers: A:** send formal letter (S)<br>**Others: E:** anger, indignation, pity, fear (S) | **3/96–3/97:** Without directly addressing musicians' anger, ED developed a compromise solution: The musician retained his job but played less often with the orchestra. Musicians continued to feel fearful and distrustful.<br>**Decision makers: E:** no evidence; **A:** offer compromise solution (M)<br>**Others: E:** anger, fear, distrust (S) |
| 2. ASO concert master | **8/93:** PC was unhappy with concert master's (CM) performance and frustrated that M would not replace him. **8/94:** He brought in a second CM, whom he insisted lead the orchestra whenever he conducted. M was apprehensive about firing the first CM, but did not think it professional to replace the CM whenever the PC was working with the orchestra.<br>**Target: E:** embarrassment, shame, hurt (S)<br>**Decision makers: E:** apprehension; **A:** none (S)<br>**Others: E:** PC unhappy, frustrated; **A:** none (M) | **9/95:** Eventually, they terminated the musician's contract and players expressed their anger at how he was treated and pity for him at the way in which it was done.<br>**Target: E:** no evidence<br>**Decision makers: A:** terminate contract (S)<br>**Others: E:** anger, pity (S) | **10/95:** ED spoke of hopes for increased musician involvement in player performance issues. **5/96–7/97:** Years later, musicians still spoke of how he had been "ousted" by the PC and expressed their fearful suspicion that the conductor still kept "a little dossier of people's playing."<br>**Decision makers: E:** no evidence; **A:** argue for new procedures (M)<br>**Others: E:** anger, fear, distrust, suspicion (S) |
| 3. BSO concert master | **5/95:** CM had returned to her position after being away with a serious illness. **12/95–6/96:** Over several months, M and some musicians questioned the quality of her playing. No action was taken, despite the repeated anxious requests of certain section principals. **1/96–6/96:** As the contract renewal deadline approached, M gathered opinions; tension built up. In informal discussions with ED, CM expressed some anxiety about the future.<br>**Target: E:** anxiety, shame (M)<br>**Decision makers: E:** unease, uncertainty; **A:** none (M)<br>**Others: E:** anxiety; **A:** ask M to take action (S) | **6/96:** M informed her that her contract would not be renewed. **6/96–7/96:** Many of the musicians previously supportive of her dismissal subsequently approached her to express their regrets, dissociating themselves from their role in it.<br>**Target: E:** shame, hurt (M)<br>**Decision makers: A:** inform her that contract would not be renewed (S)<br>**Others: E:** embarrassment, pity (S) | **9/96:** M did not respond to musicians' behavior or expressed feelings. ED appeared somewhat guilty about the decision but was convinced it was the right one. Shortly afterward, a new leader was appointed for the orchestra.<br>**Decision makers: E:** guilt; **A:** rationalize their decision (S)<br>**Others: E:** no evidence |

**Table 1 (cont'd.)**

| Decision | Inertia | Detonation | Containment |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4. BSO woodwind player | **6/94:** M had identified a performance problem in a player many months earlier and had offered him an "early retirement" deal. M did not pressure him to leave, nor begin any formal proceedings. M avoided tackling it for several months, hoping the player would retire. Others were aware of the issue and felt anxious on the player's behalf. **12/94:** Several months passed and the issue remained unresolved until a guest conductor insisted that a different musician play for him in an upcoming recording session.<br>**Target: E:** anxiety, embarrassment, fear about future (S)<br>**Decision makers: E:** apprehension and concern for player's feelings; **A:** avoid taking action (S)<br>**Others: E:** anxiety; **A:** avoid any involvement (S) | **2/95:** A letter was hurriedly sent to the player, informing him that he was not required to play that week. **2/95:** The musician immediately resigned, expressing his shame and distress to close friends. In his absence, the rest of the orchestra rose up in indignant protest.<br>**Target: E:** shame (S)<br>**Decision makers: A:** send belated, hurried, and formal letter sent (S)<br>**Others: E:** anger, indignation, fear, pity, embarrassment (S) | **2/95:** ED remained firm in his decision and wrote a letter defending his actions, suppressing the outburst. **2/95:** Musicians commented on the "blustered and defensive" nature of M's apology. **5/95–8/95:** Several continued to speak of M with fear and distrust because of how M had handled their valued colleague; some even expressed suspicion that the request had actually come from the guest conductor.<br>**Decision makers: E:** guilt, defensiveness; **A:** rationalize their decision, do not respond to musicians' feelings (S)<br>**Others: E:** fear, anger, distrust, suspicion (S) |
| 5. CSO string player | CM was unhappy with the playing of one musician but apprehensive and anxious about having to talk to him. He asked the board (B) to deal with problem. B members were also apprehensive about tackling this sensitive matter and felt that CM should speak to musician, but they did not insist. **4/96:** For many months, the issue was discussed periodically in B meetings but remained unresolved.<br>**Target: E:** unaware of the issue<br>**Decision makers: E:** apprehension, anxiety; **A:** asks others to deal with it, but they delay (S)<br>**Others: E:** anxious, afraid to become involved; **A:** none (S) | **6/96:** Eventually, two B members addressed matter with the player and offered the choice of leaving or moving back in the section. He first chose to move back. **7/96:** Others were indignant that he was allowed to stay when his playing was considered substandard.<br>**Target: E:** humiliation (M)<br>**Decision makers: A:** communicate directly with target (M)<br>**Others: E:** indignation (S) | **9/96:** B members did not force the musician out of the orchestra or address players' upset feelings, but the musician subsequently resigned because he could not bear the humiliation of others knowing he had been asked to move. **11/96:** One musician talked of this unfair "witch hunt," expressing suspicion about the reasons for the decision and deeming it very unfair.<br>**Decision makers: E:** guilt; **A:** do not respond to musicians' feelings (S)<br>**Others: E:** distrust, suspicion (S) |
| 6. CSO concert master | **6/94:** M and many players in the orchestra were increasingly unhappy with their choice of CM. Because of uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the issue, however, no action was taken to deal with it. **10/94:** Time passed and the B, without confronting the issue directly, gradually reduced the number of days that he played with them.<br>**Target: E:** unaware of the issue<br>**Decision makers: E:** anxiety, uncertainty; **A:** none (S)<br>**Others: E:** afraid to become involved; **A:** none (S) | **1/95:** Eventually the B terminated his contract, briskly and with little explanation. **2/95:** Ashamed but also angry, the ex-CM responded by taking legal action.<br>**Target: E:** humiliation, anger (M)<br>**Decision makers: A:** brisk termination of contract (S)<br>**Others: E:** pity, relief (M) | **4/96:** Years later, some spoke bitterly of how he had been "forced out." Another musician hired at the same time remained in post, despite widespread concerns about him. No one wished to confront the situation.<br>**Decision makers: E:** defensive; **A:** avoid taking action with the subsequent case (S)<br>**Others: E:** anger, distrust, suspicion (S) |

*Note.* Each cell of Table 1 concludes with a summary of the emotions (E) and actions (A) evidenced for different parties. Following each is an assessment of the degree to which the evidence supports the model presented in Figure 1 and summarized in Table 2. Because the model does not suggest emotions and actions for each party for every phase of the decision process, emotions and/or actions are listed only where relevant for the different parties and phases. S = strong evidence (where emotions *and* actions are predicted, evidence exists of both; where only emotion *or* action are predicted, evidence exists of that or those emotion(s)/action(s)); M = moderate evidence (where emotions *and* actions are predicted, evidence exists of one or the other; where only emotion *or* action are predicted, evidence exists of only one of several predicted).

Although recent attempts have been made to measure work group moods systematically via observational instruments (Bartel and Saavedra 2000), these tools have been used for short-term purposes, where observers focus solely on the emotional expressions of group members in a single meeting. The ethnographic nature of our study precluded us from undertaking a similarly systematic procedure because the decision processes observed extended over much longer periods (as long as two years) and our research focus demanded a broad examination of the decision making context. By using interviews, documentary material, and field notes gathered during the course of the decision processes, it was, however, possible to develop a contextually rich set of information not only about specific emotions but also about their sources (e.g., decision actions) and targets (e.g., decision makers).

Interview transcript excerpts made up a significant portion of the narratives and offered insight into musicians' and managers' emotional reactions to events in the decision process. Several researchers have highlighted the value of using informants' reflections on emotional events in the study of emotion in social interactions, seeing them as a more profitable way of studying emotions than directly recording and decomposing emotional encounters (Fineman 2000, Parkinson 1995). In our analysis, interviewees' reflections provided a very valuable source of data about their own and others' emotions during the decision process. Documents such as meeting minutes and letters provided key evidence for emotions experienced and expressed at the collective level, for example, the letter signed by the musicians (Decision 4) as described above. A final source of evidence on emotions came from field notes made by one of the authors during the data-collection period, which contained numerous references to organization members' emotional reactions at different points in the decision processes.

*Stage* 3: *Cross-Case Comparison.* The third stage of data analysis was a cross-case comparison (Miles and Huberman 1994) of the chronologically ordered emotion/action lists produced in the second stage. This involved looking across the six cases to identify common sequential patterns of emotions and actions. This was an iterative process in which each author separately went through the cross-case analysis to identify a sequence of emotions and actions that consistently arose across multiple cases and then compared analyses, discussing differences until agreement was reached. Because we were now interested in identifying a parsimonious set of emotions and actions that described the decision process, we required that an emotion or action be seen in at least two cases before including it in our final set. At the end of this stage, we had identified a prototypical pattern that captured the sequence of emotions and actions seen across the six instances of decision making.

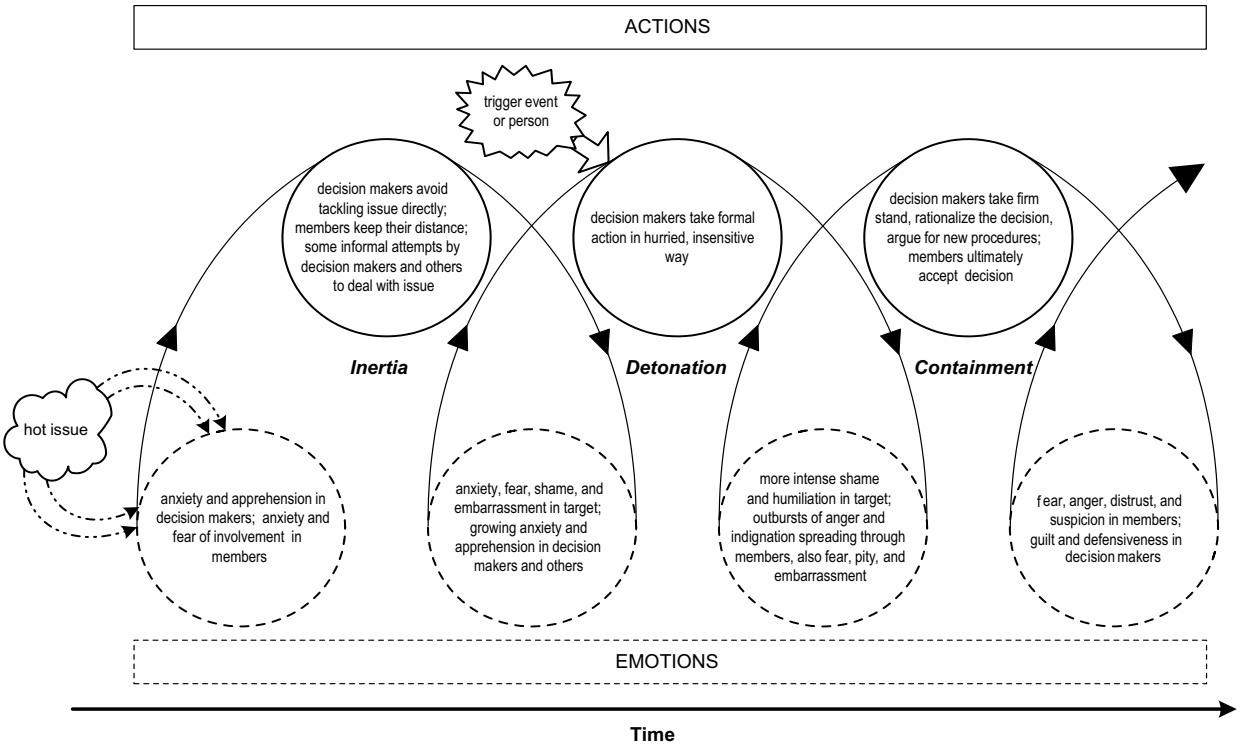
*Stage* 4: *Model Development.* In stage four, we drew on existing theory in both the decision making and emotion literatures to develop our emerging conceptualization of this emotional decision process. It was at this point that we called the process toxic, drawing on the work of Frost and Robinson (1999) and Frost (2003). Building on existing models of decision making (e.g., Hickson et al. 1986, Mintzberg et al. 1976), we identified three different phases through which the "toxic" decision making process unfolded (see Table 1). Each phase was marked by distinct emotions, actions, and reactions, as discussed further below.

*Stage* 5: *Model Refinement.* In the fifth and final stage of data analysis, we worked to refine the model of toxic decision processes. Each author went through the data again, confirming the emotions and actions that were exhibited in each phase and their interrelationships. We also returned to each narrative to increase our understanding of why and how negative emotion became widespread in each process. A summary of the dominant emotions and actions of each party for each phase for each of the six cases is provided in each cell of Table 1. However, because the model does not suggest emotions and actions for each party for every phase of the decision process, emotions (E) and/or actions (A) are listed only where relevant for the different parties and phases. Also provided is an assessment of the degree (strong (S) or moderate (M)) to which the evidence supports the model presented in Figure 1 and summarized in Table 2. The output of this stage of the analysis was a refined model of toxic decision processes that parsimoniously captured the emotion-action phases seen in the six instances analyzed.

## A Phase Model of Toxic Decision Processes

The decision processes in this study were regarded as toxic because of the widespread negative emotions they generated, which included anxiety, apprehension, anger, indignation, fear, pity, and embarrassment. These emotions were not confined to the target individuals nor to their closest associates but rather spread across many organization members. Furthermore, the toxicity in these processes did not result from a single interaction or event but from the recursive interplay of actions and negative emotions over three different phases. Each phase contributed to the cumulative buildup of toxicity and was characterized by distinctive sets of interactions that occurred among decision makers and other organizational members and by emotions that shaped and were shaped by these interactions. The transitions between the phases were marked by decision makers' actions that triggered new sets of emotional responses among organization members. In the remainder of this section, we offer detailed descriptions of the three phases of the toxic decision process, beginning with a summary of the

**Figure 1 Cycles of Emotion and Action in Toxic Decision Processes**




emotions and actions displayed by different actors in that phase (see Table 2), and their connections to one other (see Figure 1).

### Phase 1: Inertia—Avoiding the Issue

The first phase began when decision makers identified a musician whose performance appeared unsatisfactory. Feeling apprehensive about tackling this issue, decision makers often prevaricated, focusing on other, more pressing matters. As a few other organizational members became aware of the issue through the grapevine, they too became anxious, wondering what would happen and fearful of becoming involved. Informal attempts by decision makers or others to address the issue left the target musician feeling ashamed, embarrassed, anxious, and afraid for his or her future. The apprehension associated

**Table 2 Emotions and Actions in Toxic Decision Processes**

| Decision phase | Actions and reactions | Associated emotions |
|---|---|---|
| Phase 1: Inertia | • Decision makers identify the issue as needing resolution.<br>• Decision makers prevaricate, focusing on other matters.<br>• Some attempts are made by decision makers or others to deal with the issue informally.<br>• Other organizational members keep their distance.<br>• Issue is avoided by everyone. | • Buildup of anxiety and apprehension in decision makers<br>• Anxiety and fear of involvement in other organizational members<br>• Anxiety, fear, shame, and embarrassment in target individual |
| Phase 2: Detonation | • Precipitating event, external person, or buildup of pressure triggers detonation.<br>• Decision makers take formal decision action, communicating directly with the target individual, often in a hurried, insensitive manner.<br>• Issue becomes visible in public. | • More intense feelings of shame and humiliation in the target individual<br>• Anger, indignation, and fear spreading through other organizational members, also pity and feelings of embarrassment |
| Phase 3: Containment | • Decision makers use highly rational approaches to tackle the emotionally toxic situation, ignoring and suppressing the negative emotion expressed around them.<br>• Tactics include taking a firm stand, proposing compromise solutions, rationalizing to organizational members about the decision made, and arguing for new procedures.<br>• Volatile emotional context is created, with the potential to spawn further toxic decision processes. | • Guilt and defensiveness in decision makers<br>• Fear, anger, distrust, and suspicion in other organizational members |

with the issue therefore led to its avoidance by everyone. This growing anxiety combined with the resulting inaction to create a gradual buildup of emotional tension in pockets of the organization. The toxic decision processes studied here were thus characterized by an initial phase of inertia, in which the foundations of toxicity were laid.

In Decision 4, for example, the BSO management identified a performance problem in an individual many months before taking any action. The individual in question was a long-serving orchestra member whom management hoped would leave of his own accord so they would not have to tackle this sensitive issue directly. Although management eventually offered the player an "early retirement" deal, it neither pressured him to leave nor began any formal proceedings. Several more months passed, and the issue remained unresolved. A similarly long period of inertia was seen in Decision 1. Here, the ASO principal conductor had identified an individual as performing below standard. He had spoken informally to this player but knew that the administration was anxious about making personnel changes. It was more than three years before management took action to deal with his concerns. By prioritizing other issues ahead of this issue, delegating responsibility for dealing with the issue to others, and failing to respond to complaints about an unsatisfactorily performing player, the leaders of all three orchestras, it seemed, were avoiding the issue, showing a reticence that contrasted with the proactive approach in many other matters.

Organizational leaders were not the only ones who held back from tackling these decisions. Other members, even when unhappy about a situation, tended to avoid having a direct role. Some believed that such difficult issues were the responsibility of those in authority, but even individuals with some authority often felt they lacked the skills to deal with them and so preferred not to get involved. For example, section principal players in all three orchestras had a degree of line responsibility for those in their section: They were supposed to identify and address performance problems but often did not feel comfortable doing so. Selected for the job largely on the basis of their musicianship, they knew little about how to manage or appraise others. As one in the CSO commented, "When I went into this job, I had no idea what I was doing. Suddenly here I was in charge of the second biggest section of the orchestra, and suggestions came thick and fast" (string section principal, CSO). He described his apprehension, feeling very "shaky" because of his lack of training in dealing with "difficult personnel decisions." Even orchestra managers (who had personnel responsibility for the orchestra) preferred not to get involved in these hard decisions. As one commented, "They want me to do it, but why should I comment on an artistic thing? I think it's quite a dilemma—I feel section principals should deal with it first" (orchestra manager, BSO). In the self-governing CSO, the musician members of the board were ultimately expected to deal with these issues. They found this aspect of their roles extremely emotionally demanding, describing the anxiety they felt about these "painful" decisions and talking about the "sleepless nights" they induced. As the chair explained, "If you start to interfere with people's livelihood, that's the most difficult area. If someone has to leave the orchestra or be moved, that's the ultimate stress of being a Board member" (chair, CSO).

Other musicians wanted little to do with these decisions either, even if they could hear someone consistently playing below standard. Explaining their fear of getting involved, one commented, "You all know who's good and bad, but you wouldn't say" (player, BSO). This created tension for those musicians sitting near the player in question, who were often most directly affected by the quality of their performance. As another explained:

> I think the general feeling is that you don't go and talk to management; you just don't. You have to have a bloody good reason for doing so . . . . There have been one or two occasions where something needed to be done—it's very difficult to find the line . . . there's a diffusion of responsibility, a resistance to reporting it, and yet people can feel very wound up (player, BSO).

Decision makers experienced anxiety about having to make a decision, and others—even if they felt frustrated by the situation—feared direct involvement in the issue. These apprehensive feelings led to an avoidance of the issue, both by those directly affected by it and by those with formal responsibility for it.

Another feature of this phase involved the attempts that were sometimes made to deal with the issue informally, such as private conversations between the musician in question and one or two of the decision makers. While these were generally meant to be a nonthreatening way of addressing a possible problem, they often created a great deal of anxiety in the musician, who also became fearful about the future and experienced growing feelings of shame and embarrassment. The BSO's orchestra manager explained that once musicians felt the pressure of surveillance, their playing often worsened and they frequently had breakdowns, taking sick leave and seeking psychological help. Tension also grew in the musician's colleagues, who were aware of the issue and the informal attempts to deal with it. As the ASO players' chair explained in a meeting with management and board members, "We want him [the principal conductor] to stick to the procedure for dealing with personnel problems—not have cozy chats in his room . . . . You don't realize how much the informal procedure threatens morale" (players' chair, ASO).

Despite the emotions evoked in this phase, toxicity might have dissipated had the issue simply disappeared

over time. This did not happen, however, in the decision processes we studied. Although a musician's playing quality could vary by concert performance and was variously more and less audible, it was rare for an individual to spontaneously start playing at a consistently higher standard. The issue thus remained and the toxicity grew. Tension and anxiety around the issue and the need for a decision gradually built up, creating a pressurized situation that increasingly demanded attention. Thus, the first phase of the process was characterized by apprehension and anxiety, which were perpetuated by the inertial decision making behavior and ongoing avoidance of action.

### Phase 2: Detonation—Decisive Actions and Explosive Emotions

The second phase of the decision process began with a formal decision action, typically a direct communication with the target individual. Because of the sudden need for action and the tension that had built up in pockets of the organization, the communication was often carried out in a hurried, insensitive manner, bringing the issue very clearly into the public domain. After the long inertial first phase, the sudden and swift action that triggered phase two was often a shock to all concerned. Members reacted with angry outcries, the intensity of their reactions heightened by the anxiety generated in the previous phase. As members became more emotionally engaged with their colleague's situation, anger, indignation, fear, and embarrassment became widespread.

In most of the decision processes, the detonating action was precipitated by an external person or event or a deadline that forced the issue to the top of the decision making agenda. For example, in Decision 1, the ASO's principal conductor (an external figure, who spent several weeks a year with the orchestra) was the driving force behind a letter that was sent out to the target player; he had also been responsible for the decision to fire a previous concert master (Decision 2). In Decision 4, a guest conductor's request that an alternative BSO musician play for a CD recording led to the letter that in turn resulted in the player's resignation. In Decision 3, the approaching deadline of the BSO concert master's contract renewal date forced management to make a decision about the musician in question. In other instances, such as in Decision 5, this phase of the decision process seemed to emerge as a result of growing pressure from within, in this case from the CSO's concert master.

Once the action had been taken, the target musician generally responded swiftly in ways that signaled significant emotional pain. In Decision 1, an ASO musician called in sick after receiving a letter from the executive director requesting that he reaudition for his position. In Decision 4, a BSO player immediately resigned on receiving a letter informing him that he was not required to play that week for a recording session with a particular guest conductor—despite the fact that the letter did not directly address the musician's future with the orchestra. In Decision 5, members of the CSO board offered an underperforming player the option of leaving or moving to sit at the back of the section; the musician left a week later. All of these responses indicate the emotional intensity of the target musician's experience.

Other organizational members responded to the decision with anger and indignation. For example, the executive director described the players' reaction when the BSO woodwind player was instructed not to play for a visiting conductor (Decision 4):

> When we got the [woodwind] thing wrong, all the wind players came into my office at lunchtime—we had an afternoon and evening session—and the principal wind players came and said, "We're not playing this afternoon—we're not going down; we're not playing for [the guest conductor] this afternoon." I was presented with that decision, there and then (executive director, BSO).

In another case, an ASO section principal described the indignant reactions of the musicians to the letter sent to their colleague (Decision 1):

> There is a brass player under scrutiny at the moment, and every brass player in the orchestra, whether they were on or off for the concert, came in and we upped to his [the principal conductor's] office and we said, "You are wrong" (section principal, ASO).

Such emotional reactions were often associated with a "scapegoating" response, that is, musicians turning aggressively on the perceived trigger of the decision action (Kahn 1998). The expressions of anger were associated with a deeper-rooted fear: One musician in the ASO, for example, spoke of "a little dossier" that he believed the principal conductor kept for recording different individuals' poor performances.

Organizational members also felt embarrassed, some about their passivity, others about joining with decision makers against someone with whom they shared social bonds and a professional identity (Scheff 1994). In some cases, these feelings led members to engage in actions to try to repair the situation, protesting to management or expressing their sympathy to the musician in question. In Decision 3, for example, the executive director explained in an interview how he had held several meetings with section principals to gather their views before deciding to terminate the concert master's employment, a decision they fully supported. Angrily, he described their subsequent embarrassed reaction and dissociation from the decision: "...[O]ne of the principal players went up [to the leader] and said, 'Oh, I'm so sorry you're leaving; what can we do to make you stay?'—having sat

with me on three occasions in a group and said, 'This won't work' " (executive director, BSO).

These complex and often contrasting sets of emotions created feelings of ambivalence in organizational members, quite a common reaction to another's plight (Clark 1997). These feelings were partly a response to the conflicting demands of members' multiple roles; for instance, operating within their professional role, they may have felt some relief when action was taken to deal with poor performance in the orchestra, but this contradicted the pity they felt, as friends, for longstanding associates. At the same time, they may have identified with the target musician, experiencing fear that the same thing could happen to them.

### Phase 3: Containment—Rationalization and Repression

In the final phase of the process, decision makers responded to members' emotional uprising with actions that often seemed to lack feeling, using highly rational approaches to tackle the toxic situation. Rather than handling the toxicity in ways that might help it to dissipate, they sought to ignore and suppress the negative emotion that was expressed around them. Their tactics included taking a firm stand, rationalizing to organizational members the decision made, proposing compromise solutions of a more amenable nature, and arguing for new procedures that might prevent the process from recurring. Decision makers' guilt and defensiveness and their failure to deal effectively with the emotions generated by their previous actions led to fear, anger, distrust, and suspicion in organizational members. Through this cycle of action and emotion, a volatile emotional context was created that had the potential to spawn further toxic decision processes.

In Decision 4, the BSO's executive director decided to take a firm stand in dealing with the outburst of feeling triggered by the wind player's resignation. In response to the deputation described in the previous phase, he told the protesting musicians—

> I hear you. I am saying to you, if you don't play, if you're not there at 2:30, I won't replace you. I shall close the orchestra down. If you want to take that decision . . . I'll do that, because you are actually withdrawing your labor, but I won't replace you. I'll cancel (the guest conductor)'s contract this week and close the orchestra down. Go away and think about it (executive director, BSO).

The musicians returned to their seats and played for the conductor. While this approach prevented members' emotions from halting all activity, it did not soothe their feelings. The players' chair subsequently called a meeting of the whole orchestra, all of whom signed a letter of protest to the executive director. In it, the musicians' fears were evident: "[N]one of us can count on the support of our management against the whim of any passing conductor" (letter from players' chair to executive director, BSO). In a private interview, the executive director described this situation as "the biggest problem we've had since I came to the orchestra" and as "unnecessary—bad management." Despite this, he believed the best way to proceed was to take a firm stand and present a clear defense to the orchestra. In a letter of response to the players, he rationalized the process:

> [Gathering guest conductors' opinions] is an essential part of the process that monitors playing standards and the quality of the overall performance . . . . In this case, the management did not accede to the demands of one particular conductor; the situation had developed over a period of time and needed a positive resolution to save embarrassment on both sides (letter from executive director to players' chair, BSO).

Players were still talking angrily about this issue and the way it had been dealt with several months later. In an interview, one commented, "It was really the way the management handled it . . . . Obviously management feel quite defensive when quite a big mistake had been made . . . . The apology was very blustered and defensive" (player, BSO). Players in the CSO also spoke of the decision processes with suspicion, one describing Decision 5 as a "witch hunt," observing that the target did not "have enough friends on the Board."

Developing compromise solutions was another common means of managing the fallout from these difficult decisions. In Decision 5, the CSO musician was not fired but was offered the choice of moving back in the section or leaving. At first he chose to stay, and despite the executive director's observation that he was "sitting at the back and wrecking it," no one forced him out of the orchestra. Such compromise solutions were common. In a similar decision some years prior to this, another violinist had been moved from the front of the first violin section to the back and then eventually over to the back of the second violins. In Decision 1, the ASO's executive director worked with the musicians' union to try to identify solutions that allowed the gradual reduction of work for the musician in question. As the executive director explained:

> [M]aybe the right solution for him [the brass player] is to do a much smaller percentage of the work, not sever his links entirely with the [ASO], but be somebody who is brought in on a different contract . . . . Maybe a compromise . . . is to rota in a player, guarantee a certain amount of work, free up their diary to do other work . . . . Maybe that's a solution (executive director, ASO).

The other approach taken by decision makers involved a discussion around the need for new procedures that would better address these difficult matters, such as increasing organizational members' involvement in the decision process. In the BSO, for instance, management described the plan to introduce appraisals that would be

carried out by section principals. Similarly, in the ASO, the executive director was keen for section principals to take on a greater role in these decisions:

> I want the players to become more involved, as section leaders, in quality standards in their section . . . . Each section leader ought to almost have a performance appraisal process . . . . If there are weak players, we don't have the player in and talk about reauditioning, because the section leader ought to say, "Look, let's be realistic—do you want to be a member of this orchestra or not?" and in a kind sort of way encourage the player to look elsewhere—not having it management driven but management supported (executive director, ASO).

Despite the widespread view of the benefits of introducing new mechanisms for player performance appraisal, only minimal efforts were made to establish them. Moreover, it was clear that none of these sensible and rational proposals addressed either organizational members' considerable reluctance to become involved in such decisions concerning their colleagues or the variety and strength of feelings that became associated with these issues.

Decision makers' responses in this phase resulted in a decision process that lacked emotional resolution. Their attempts to rationalize their actions without attending to the emotions aroused in the process greatly intensified feelings of anger, distrust, and suspicion. At the same time, because the compromises and proposals did not directly address the emotions inherent in the situation, members' feelings of fear and uncertainty persisted. Surrounded by these negative emotional reactions, decision makers felt weary, defensive, and, in some cases, guilty. At the start of the process they had perceived the decision issue as difficult and sensitive; the negative emotions they now felt were precisely those they had wished to avoid. Together, this combination of angry and distrustful musicians and leaders who felt "burnt" and defensive created a negative emotional context that offered fertile ground for further decision making avoidance and ensuing toxicity.

### Summary

In this section, we presented a three-phase model of toxic decision processes and showed how each phase was associated with particular sets of actions relating to some issue. The first stage was characterized by decision makers' and others' avoidance of the issue, while the second phase was triggered by a formal decision regarding that issue. The final phase involved rationalization of the decision by those who made it. We also argued that there were particular sets of negative emotions connected to the actions in each phase: In the first phase, we saw anxiety, apprehension, fear, shame, and embarrassment; in the second phase, shame, humiliation, anger, indignation, embarrassment, fear, and pity; and in the third phase, guilt, defensiveness, fear, anger, distrust, and suspicion. The model thus describes a process in which emotions and actions interact, such that the emotions generated in earlier phases shape certain actions in the decision process, and, in turn, people's emotional responses to these actions.

## Discussion

In this section, we build on our description of toxic decision processes to discuss some key related issues. First, we examine the mechanisms that connected actions and emotions in each phase, explaining why the processes unfolded as they did and how toxicity was generated at each stage. We then explore the role of context in the development of toxic decision processes.

### Action—Emotion Links in Each of the Three Phases of Toxic Decision Processes

*Decision-Making Inertia: The Construction of a Danger Zone in Phase 1.* The toxic decision processes examined here began as decision makers' anxiety and apprehension about an issue caused them to avoid dealing with it. We argue that some organizational issues are inherently emotional in nature (Ashford 1998) and thus likely to precipitate a toxic decision process. We know from previous research that the way in which an issue is interpreted—for example, as a threat or an opportunity—has significant effects on members' responses to it (Dutton et al. 1983). This study suggests that the emotions evoked by a particular issue can also have an important influence on how organizational actors behave. Here, the emotions evoked by the issue led to the construction of what we refer to as a "danger zone"—a shared sense among a group of individuals that some issue is potentially harmful and better left alone. Danger zones were constructed around the issues in these processes as people experienced emotions that led them to avoid dealing with the issues, which in turn led to a greater buildup of negative emotion and further inertial decision making behavior. Although danger zones were thus not produced through organizational members' active coconstruction, they came into being as several individuals simultaneously experienced an issue as dangerous and therefore to be avoided. We argue that three characteristics of the issue made it especially likely to trigger the construction of a danger zone: being highly sensitive, being ambiguous, and being nonurgent.

First, the issue of unsatisfactory player performance was highly sensitive in that it was of a very personal nature, containing a negative judgment of an individual's job performance and perhaps of that person's musical ability more generally. This generated intense negative emotion in the individual, not only because of the significant implications it had for his or her future employment, but also for his or her identity as a musician and therefore his or her social identity more broadly (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). When musicians perceived

that their ability to do their job, and therefore their identity, was in question, they experienced feelings of shame, worthlessness, helplessness, and humiliation (Tangney and Dearing 2002). The sensitivity of the issue also led to a strong emotional reaction in decision makers and other organizational members who felt anxious about dealing with the situation, preferring to put off any action and distance themselves as far as possible. Colleagues engaged in what has been labeled an "avoidant response," which occurs when people imagine themselves experiencing another's plight (Batson et al. 1997). The decision makers in our study acted in a way consistent with corporate managers who have been shown to distance themselves from the "victims" of painful decisions, spending minimal time with them when breaking the news or avoiding them altogether (Folger and Skarlicki 1998).

In addition to its sensitive nature, the ambiguous and subjective character of the decision criteria added considerably to decision makers' anxiety and reluctance to act. There is no absolute standard that determines "unsatisfactory performance"; objective measures do not exist, and musicians' performances will vary from concert to concert. There were therefore no clear rules existed that defined what "acceptable playing" was or that indicated when "unacceptable playing" was so consistently inadequate that the musician should be asked to leave. In addition, it is much easier to detect poor playing in certain orchestral positions (e.g., the timpani or the principal oboe) than in others (a second violin seated at the back of the section). Ambiguous issues such as this tend to lead to more contentious decision processes, as decisions are harder to make and take longer to resolve (Hickson et al. 1986). In the present study, the ambiguous nature of the issue left decision makers and other organizational members uncertain when and even whether it was appropriate to take action.

The third characteristic of the issue—its lack of urgency—was connected less to the initial triggering of negative emotion than to the ongoing avoidance of the issue, fueling the construction of the danger zone and thereby extending the inertial phase. The issue of player performance was neither critically urgent nor of great strategic significance. As with ambiguity, the urgency of the issue varied across different orchestral positions; unsatisfactory playing in one individual did not, however, prevent the organization from functioning. It would have been beneficial to the orchestra's overall level of performance to have dismissed certain musicians, but failing to make an immediate decision did not prevent business from going on much as usual. In contrast to urgent decisions made in high-velocity environments (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988), it was easy for this type of issue to slip down the agenda. Because of the inherent latitude decision makers experienced in taking action, the inertial phase of the decision process was prolonged, and the levels of apprehension, anxiety, and fear in the organization increased. While it is possible that an urgent issue could also trigger a decision process that generated widespread negative emotion, we would expect such a process to look rather different from the model presented in this paper, lacking a first, inertial phase and the corresponding buildup of tension.

The concept of a danger zone, generated through the feelings of fear and anxiety associated with the issue and the avoiding behavior that these feelings provoked, contrasts with a comfort or safety zone, which individuals seek for the feelings of familiarity, ease, and calm it invokes (Laundre and Richmond 2001). While danger zones do not inevitably appear whenever organizational members avoid tackling an issue, they emerged in these decision processes because of the intense emotions triggered. Individuals felt apprehensive and fearful and did not act to remove the source of their anxiety. We do not argue, however, that sensitive, ambiguous, nonurgent issues will inevitably lead to the construction of danger zones; also critical in this study was the way in which decision makers acted and reacted to their own emotions and those of organizational members, which was not determined solely by characteristics of the issue. Had decision makers handled the issue's emotional dynamics with awareness—acknowledging, monitoring, and attending to members' emotions (Huy 2002)—and in a timely manner, they might have stemmed the buildup of toxicity and allowed decision making to proceed with the negative feelings relatively contained. At the same time, we expect that only certain types of issue, handled poorly, will generate such danger zones. For example, if decision makers delayed dealing with a relatively unambiguous issue that was not especially sensitive, it is unlikely that feelings of anxiety and fear would become widespread in the organization or that there would be an outburst of anger when a decision was eventually made. Emotions therefore become a powerful force shaping decision making when certain kinds of issue and behaviors combine.

*The Spread of Toxicity: Empathetic Transmission and Emotional Contagion in Phase 2.* The sudden and insensitive formal action with which the second phase began often exacerbated the target individual's feelings of shame and resulted in the widespread expression of anger, indignation, and fear in other organization members. It is not surprising that people in organizations have emotional reactions to decisions—research on organizational change, downsizing, mergers, and other significant organizational events has shown that affected individuals respond with a range of emotions including anger, fear, and grief (Wolfram-Cox 1997). What was striking and demands explanation in the present study is how and why these negative emotions permeated the organization, spreading to members on whom the decision had

no direct impact. Certainly the spread of toxicity was not a result of deliberate efforts by the target individual to incite a reaction in colleagues or to seek revenge; on the contrary, none of the "victims" challenged the decision or actively sought to garner support from those around them. Rather, we argue that toxicity spread through two related mechanisms: the empathetic transmission and the emotional contagion of negative emotion, each discussed below.

When the decision was announced, musicians closest to the target individual felt pity for their longstanding associate, who was often also a friend. As people empathized with the other's suffering and became more emotionally engaged in the decision process, they were more likely to experience painful emotions such as fear about their own future and guilt and embarrassment about their involvement (or lack of involvement) in the decision process. We refer to this process—in which others experience certain emotions because of their empathy for an individual—as the "empathetic transmission" of emotion. We argue that it is more likely to occur when organizational members perceive the target individual as similar to themselves, as has been demonstrated in the case of the intense feelings of despair found in layoff survivors, who see themselves as similar to the layoff victims (Brockner et al. 1987). In the cases studied here, where "survivors" were members of the same intense work group and all knew the "victim," it was especially easy for them to identify with him or her. This process may also have interacted with members' perceptions of procedural and interactional injustice (e.g., Bies 1987, Greenberg 1994): Musicians sometimes agreed that a colleague no longer played as he or she once had but were unhappy about the process through which the decision had been made or the way in which it had been conveyed to the target individual. Perceiving the process as unjust, they may have felt especially fearful for their own futures (Folger and Cropanzano 1998). Organizational members' tendency to identify with the target is thus likely to have played a critical role in the empathic transmission of emotions in this phase.

The second mechanism that was central to the spread of negative emotion in phase two was that of emotional contagion. Previous research has shown that emotions can be "contagious," whether transmitted unconsciously (Hatfield et al. 1994) or intentionally (Pugh 2001). This is especially so in the case of "high-activation" emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, and anger (Bartel and Saavedra 2000), which are easily conveyed and picked up by others. Negative emotions have also been found to be more contagious than positive ones (Joiner 1994), and such contagiously generated collective emotion in turn has been shown to influence group behavior (Barsade 2002). In this study, organizational members responded to decision makers' formal action with anger, indignation, and fear—all high-activation emotions susceptible to emotional contagion. These feelings were expressed in very vocal, emotional protests and challenges to the decision makers, as well as among groups of musicians in breaks between rehearsals and after work. Such interactions intensified the contagious spread of emotions, which we argue further fueled the generation of collective toxicity in the organization.

*The Suppression of Emotions: Rational Accounts and Procedures in Phase 3.* In the final phase, guilty and defensive decision makers adopted rational approaches to tackle the emotionally toxic situation, ignoring and suppressing the negative emotion expressed around them. Here we consider why decision makers responded as they did and examine how their responses contributed to the development of a volatile emotional context.

Expressions of intense negative emotion, such as anger and fear, are often unacceptable in organizational settings, going against norms of rationality (Mumby and Putnam 1992) and counter to common feeling rules of enthusiasm and good humor (Van Maanen and Kunda 1989). When decision makers were faced with intense and widespread expressions of anger, fear, and indignation, they sought to eliminate these "inappropriate" emotions, normalizing the emotional climate. Rather than using apologies or expressions of sympathetic concern, decision makers in this study used reframing and other rational approaches to suppress others' negative emotions, perhaps seeking to lessen their apparent responsibility or the apparent severity of the consequences (Ashforth and Lee 1990). Alternatively, they may have been afraid that an apology or some other softer response would imply guilt on their part, or they may have simply believed force and rationality the best ways of dealing with the emotional situation.

This response not only failed to diffuse members' emotions but seemed to incite still further toxicity in the organization. Although accounts and explanations can normalize emotions in organizations, they are unlikely to ease individuals' bad feelings if they come across as disingenuous or defensive (Ashforth and Lee 1990). While studies of employee reactions to injustice indicate that managers who make unpopular decisions cannot expect to escape negative reactions simply by providing explanations (Shapiro 1991), the accounts offered by decision makers in the instances examined here did not even begin to address the feelings expressed by organizational members. Rather, decision makers strove to eliminate the expression of feeling, failing to attend to members' emotions in a way that was beneficial to individuals and the organization alike (Frost 2003, Huy 2002). Moreover, they completely failed to address the underlying causes of members' expressed emotions. In such situations, the conflict and associated emotions get driven underground to incubate and surface at a later date (Smith 1989).

We believe that this is what happened in the toxic decision processes studied here: Suppressed feelings combined with decision makers' guilt and defensiveness and resulted in the creation of a volatile emotional context that had the potential to precipitate further toxic decision processes. A volatile emotional context can be understood as an "affective climate" (Pirola-Merlo et al. 2002) of fear, anger, distrust, and suspicion.

We suggest two key processes through which a volatile emotional context might affect subsequent handling of hot issues. First, decision makers' guilt and defensiveness may increase their apprehension and reluctance to take action when faced with a similar issue in the future (Staw et al. 1981); this could reinitiate the inertial phase of a toxic decision process. Second, a climate of distrust and fear among organizational members may make them especially sensitive to the way in which future decisions are made (Morrison and Robinson 1997) and lead them to react with still greater expressions of fear in the face of inertia and anger toward decision makers. We are not arguing, however, that organizations that experience toxic decision processes necessarily exist in constantly repeating cycles of toxic decision making; if no similar issues arise, and in the face of compromise actions implemented by decision makers, the emotional energy surrounding the issue may gradually diminish, especially as other issues surface.

### The Role of Context

As a final part of our discussion, we consider the role of context in the development of toxic decision processes. We do this to address two issues. First, we are interested in identifying aspects of the orchestral context that may make these organizations particularly susceptible to toxicity-generating decision processes. Second, we are interested in the variance in decision processes across the orchestras. To develop a general theoretical model of toxic decision processes, this paper has focused on commonalties across the decision processes, but the differences among decision processes are also important in highlighting the important links between context, process, and the generation of toxicity. We therefore examine how differences in the local contexts of each orchestra shaped the decision processes that occurred there, in turn influencing the nature of the toxicity generated.

Although we expect that toxic decision processes occur in a great variety of organizations, orchestras possess certain characteristics that may facilitate their development. First, issues of individual performance take on a special meaning in an orchestra because of the importance of a musician's professional identity in his or her social identity (Levine and Levine 1996). The personal significance of "unsatisfactory player performance" thus heightens the sensitivity of the issue for that individual, increasing that person's shame as well as others' apprehension and discomfort around the issue. Second, orchestras are notable for the relative homogeneity of their membership and uniformity of their daily work activity (all 100 playing members are professional musicians who work closely together, with complete interdependence, every day). The homogeneity, uniformity, physical proximity, and interpersonal closeness of organizational members in an orchestra are likely to result in greater empathy for a musician identified as playing unsatisfactorily and in strong feelings of fear for oneself and of anger toward the decision makers, which will spread rapidly and pervasively through frequently interacting members. We argue, however, that while these characteristics of the context may lead to especially intense and pervasive emotions, they are not solely responsible for the generation of toxicity that occurs. Rather, the relative transparency of this extreme case allows us the close examination of the development of toxic decision processes and of a model that can be tested in other contexts.

Also important to our study is an investigation of the role played by features of the local context of each orchestra in shaping toxic decision processes. The three orchestras were similar in their size and basic organizational structure but differed in their governance structures and in facets of their organizational climate, each of which may have influenced aspects of the toxic decision process. With respect to governance, the key difference among the orchestras concerned decision making authority in dealing with unsatisfactory player performance. In the ASO, decision making powers for artistic matters (including dealing with unsatisfactory player performance) lay with the principal conductor. In the BSO, these decisions were made by the executive team, in particular, the CEO and the senior producer. The CSO was a self-governing organization in which a player-elected committee dealt with all personnel issues and, in conjunction with the relevant section principal, was expected to decide appropriate action around unsatisfactory player performance issues.

There were also differences in organizational climate in the three orchestras, notably concerning relations between musicians and key decision makers. Many musicians in the ASO were quite fearful of their principal conductor, aware of his exacting standards. To some extent, they looked to the management for protection. In the BSO, a strong "us and them" climate prevailed: Musicians saw themselves as working in opposition to their managers, of whom many spoke quite critically. The dynamic was more complex in the CSO, where any musician could be elected to serve on the board and players' committee; those who did so were regarded with some gratitude for taking on this time-consuming and demanding role. The few professional managers who worked for the orchestra were employed by the musicians and could also be fired by them.

We argue that these differences in governance structure and organizational climate affected the toxicity observed through their impact on the actions and reactions of management and others. While the ASO's principal conductor had the authority to make artistic decisions, management was cautious about letting him, and they worked to delay him. Thus, the inertial phases in the ASO continued for a long time, with players aware of the conductor's dissatisfaction and desire to make personnel changes but not knowing how or when any change would occur. Feeling under the critical eye of their conductor, some expressed fear about their futures that became very intense when formal decisions were finally taken. Because of the preexisting climate of uncertainty and trepidation in ASO musicians and because of the very extended inertial phase, much of the toxicity in this organization took the form of widespread anxiety and fear.

In the BSO, the structure and "us and them" atmosphere led musicians to demonstrate considerable ambivalence. On one hand, they felt frustrated hearing members of their orchestra playing below standard, but at the same time, they refused to join with management in dealing with the issue. The effects of this were strong emotional responses after formal action was taken, as musicians sought to dissociate themselves from management's decision. The management, used to hearing criticism from the musicians, faced the emotional outbursts with cold rationalizations. These responses further fueled musicians' distrust of management and greatly perpetuated the "us and them" climate. A salient aspect of the toxicity generated here was therefore the anger and suspicion that prevailed following the detonating action.

The self-governing structure of the CSO meant that decision makers on the players' committee were in the difficult position of having to make decisions about their own colleagues. Feelings of anxiety and apprehension therefore ran high in decision makers, who felt great pity and empathy for their associates and consequently delayed taking action, extending the inertia phase. Once the decision was taken, the target individual's shame and humiliation was often especially intense, as he or she felt negatively judged by a fellow musician colleague. Other players expressed concerns about the process or decision outcome but lacked an external scapegoat, realizing that if they did not like the committee's decision, they should put themselves forward to serve instead. The toxicity in this organization therefore contained quite far-reaching feelings of apprehension and guilt, as members experienced pity and empathy both for the target individual and for the decision makers.

Looking across the three orchestras, we can see that the importance of musicians' professional identities and the homogeneity of the workforce created a context in which personnel issues might be especially likely to lead to toxic decision processes. At the same time, however, the differences in local context and the ensuing differences in actions and reactions led to the creation of distinctive forms of toxicity in the different decision processes. This variance thus suggests that the toxicity observed was not simply determined by the issue but resulted from the interplay of the issue and organizational members' actions and emotions in response to it.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have introduced the concept of a toxic decision process and developed a model of how these processes unfold in organizations. We defined toxic decision processes as those that generate widespread negative emotion in an organization through the recursive interplay of members' actions and negative emotions. We have described the three phases through which toxic decision processes unfold, each contributing to the cumulative buildup and diffusion of toxicity. Each phase is characterized by distinctive sets of interactions occurring among decision makers and other organizational members and by emotions that shape and are shaped by these interactions. We have also discussed the emotion-action links in each phase, identifying different underlying mechanisms that help explain why the toxic decision processes unfolded as they did.

The study described in this paper has limitations. One potential weakness is that all of the decision processes analyzed were concerned with the same issue—unsatisfactory player performance. This approach permitted a rigorous, cross-organization examination of six instances of decision making in the same area but leaves unanswered questions of how such processes unfold around different kinds of emotional issues. We expect that the model will hold for a range of sensitive, ambiguous, nonurgent issues, but its applicability remains to be tested. A second limitation of this study relates to the fact that it was conducted in symphony orchestras. While player performance issues in professional orchestras offer transparently observable instances of emotion-imbued decision making, this study raises questions about toxic decision processes in different organizations and with different occupational groups. We do not expect that toxic decision processes, or the emotional dynamics that underlie them, are unique to orchestral life, and so future research could valuably examine the generalizability of the model presented in other contexts. Despite these limitations, this paper makes a number of contributions and has important implications for research on decision making in organizations.

### Implications for Research on Individual Decision Making

Although our focus has been on organizational decision processes, the analysis presented here also contributes to

our understanding of individual decision making. Most critically, we show how an individual's different emotions may interact to produce action in organizational settings. In this study, organizational members felt empathy for the target, which tends to lead individuals to behave altruistically. But at the same time they experienced distress, which leads people to avoid or escape from emotionally disturbing situations (Batson et al. 1983). Members lacked both the power to help the target individual and the opportunity to escape from the distressing situation; they were also unable to experience cathartic relief, as they might when empathizing with a victim in a theatrical tragedy (Aristotle 1982). In the orchestras studied here, these very real "tragedies" played out at close quarters for members, and over an extended period. While they shared with one another their feelings of anger, fear, and distrust, orchestra members' emotions did not dissipate through their cathartic expression but instead seemed to intensify and pervade through the orchestra. These dynamics suggest that research that examines the role of single emotions outside a real context may provide a misleading portrayal of individual decision making; any of the single emotions examined here might have been expected to lead to individual actions that did not result because of their interaction with other emotions and the context in which they were experienced.

## Implications for Research on Organizational Decision Processes

*Decisions as Rational Choices.* In our review of organizational decision-making research, we argued that even rational models of organizational decision making imply the possible role of emotions. Important gaps in this research concern the way in which anticipatory emotions influence decision processes and how emotions experienced after making a decision influence subsequent decisions. Our study addressed these issues, suggesting that decision makers' anxiety and apprehension about an issue may delay a decision action, which can in turn intensify others' anxiety and generate tension in an organization. We also suggested that guilt and defensiveness felt by decision makers after taking a formal action was likely to increase their reluctance to make such decisions in the future and that the fear and distrust generated through the toxic process may lead to still more intense reactions of fear and anger in future decision making situations.

The implication of these findings for boundedly rational models of decision making, therefore, is that negative anticipatory and post hoc emotions may have significant effects not only on decision choices but on the entire way in which decisions are made. More specifically, negative anticipatory emotions seem to be associated with delayed choices, which can fuel further negative emotions, while negative post hoc emotions can lead to more intensely experienced negative emotional reactions in future decision processes. This study thus adds to the bounded rationality perspective on decision making by showing that rather than being at odds with rationality, emotion is in fact a central part of it: Emotions fundamentally shape our preferences and expectations about consequences—key determinants of decision making. Even the most rational elements of decision making processes are therefore significantly determined by how we feel.

*Decisions as Rule-Based Actions.* This study also demonstrates the importance of emotion for rule-based models of decision making, which highlight how decisions are made as actors match their organizational identities to rules of appropriate behavior (March and Simon 1993). Our study sheds significant light on the relationship between identity and emotion in this matching process; we show, for instance, that individuals respond to identity-threatening decisions with feelings of shame and humiliation, which in turn cause them to withdraw from the organization. We also show that self-conscious emotions, such as embarrassment, are especially likely to be empathetically transmitted among organizational members when they share a professional identity that has been threatened by a decision action. Research in this area, should, therefore, acknowledge that decisions concerning identity-threatening issues may have an intense and widespread emotional impact that leads organizational members to withdraw from the organization and its rules of appropriate behavior. We therefore see that the situation-identity matching process that underlies rule-based models of decision making needs to include emotion as a central theoretical element: our interpretations of identity and situation, and our reactions to them, are deeply influenced by our feelings about who and where we are.

*Decisions as Political Contests.* This study also contributes to political models of decision making, which have placed greater emphasis on the tactics and strategies actors adopt in the decision process than on the role of their accompanying emotions. In this study, emotions may not necessarily have been expressed with a political intent, but they nevertheless had profound political effects on the decision process. For example, the anxiety and tension that built up in the inertial phase caused decision makers to act abruptly and insensitively in implementing their decision; later, members' angry post-decision response drove decision makers into a defensive stance, digging in their heels to uphold their authority. While political models of decision making might suggest that organizational members "use" emotion to get their needs met, the emotions expressed in the decision processes studied here largely perpetuated the toxic

process, failing to serve anyone's interests. The findings of this study suggest a different role for emotions in political models of decision making and perhaps in political models of organizations more generally. While emotion played a critical role in shaping the enactment of power in the three organizations, the political effects of different emotions, expressed individually and collectively, were not necessarily tied to individuals' overt or covert political strategies. Political models of organizational decision making therefore may benefit by shifting their attention from the tactics and strategies of interest-driven actors to the political effects of their actions, and especially of their emotional expression.

Emotion has not, unfortunately, featured prominently in classic theories of organizational decision making. The three models have at times even been used to describe decision making as driven *not* by emotion but by calculation, compliance, or self-interest. Our study of toxic decision processes, however, belies such distinctions: The decisions examined here demonstrate that emotion interacts critically with rationality, rules, and politics in organizational decision making. Moreover, we believe that emotion may offer a powerful way to cut across and connect these lenses on decision making and that our model of toxic decision processes provides an example of how this could be done. Decision-making research might be significantly advanced by the development of detailed models of concrete decision processes that necessarily include the interplay of rationality, rules, politics—and emotion.

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