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NAVIGATING SPACE FOR PERSONAL AGENCY: AUXILIARY ROUTINES AS ADAPTATIONS IN TOXIC ORGANIZATIONS

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Many workers experience organization dysfunction stemming from leaders. Yet organization members have limited responses; they can directly or indirectly confront senior leaders, engage individual stress coping strategies, or leave the organization. We offer another response by theorizing auxiliary routines as behavioral sequences through which multiple actors coordinate responses to complex and enduring socioemotional dynamics that threaten to undermine the enactment of standard operating task routines. Through a qualitative, inductive study of a consulting firm, we delimit three auxiliary routines—absorption, dissemination, and differentiation—through which people navigate between the destructiveness of organizational toxicity and the need to perform given roles and tasks. We illustrate how these routines emerged in response to role and psychological diminishment originating from senior leaders, how the routines helped manage and sometimes perpetuate diminishment, and the consequences for individuals' personal agency and the organization as a whole. In doing so, we contribute to knowledge about coping with toxic organizational conditions and on routines as a facet of emotional capability in organizations.

Dysfunction and pathology in organizations is an unfortunate reality for too many workers. The so-called "toxic workplace" has received increasing scrutiny in the popular press (Chapman & White, 2014; Kusy & Holloway, 2009) and among organizational scholars (Frost, 2003; Maitlis, 2008). Toxicity in organizations can appear as intolerance, bullying, narcissism, and other forms of destructiveness (Goldman, 2008) that, over time, can demoralize members and undermine organizational purposes (Pelletier, 2010). Toxicity is often linked to senior leaders who perpetrate or fail to stem destructive patterns of behavior (Kets de Vries, 1991; Lipman-Blumen, 2006) that invariably narrow the space for subordinates to enact their roles according to their own sensibilities (Miller, 1993). That space is further narrowed as people experience painful emotion from toxicity that leaves them less able and willing to reclaim the authority inherent in their roles. Toxic organizations are thus those in which "personal agency" (i.e., the capacity to act independently and make choices; Billett & Smith, 2007) is dismantled. Enduring cultures are created and maintained in which such destructiveness and work coexist in some fashion. This raises the question of how organization members navigate this coexistence, expanding the space necessary for personal agency amid forces narrowing that space.

We found ourselves grappling with this phenomenon during an inductive, qualitative study of a consulting firm marked by toxic conditions. To explain how managers and their subordinates navigated those conditions to perform given roles, we develop theory utilizing organizational routines. Scholars distinguish between focal and auxiliary routines: "focal routines" are recurring patterns of interrelated behavior that enable the stable performance of organizational tasks (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Pentland, 2003), while "auxiliary routines" shape focal routines and illustrate how they are embedded in broader contexts (Sonenshein, 2016). We theorize a type of auxiliary process through which multiple actors coordinate responses to complex and enduring socioemotional dynamics that threaten to undermine the enactment of standard operating task routines, on behalf of themselves, others, and their work. To preview our findings, we found that people engaged in three auxiliary routines—absorption, dissemination, and differentiation—that middle leaders initiated according to how much or little control

they had over the boundaries regulating the relationship between their groups and senior leaders. These routines held different consequences for members' personal agency and the perpetuation of toxicity in the firm. They also rendered firm members unavailable to engage organizational growth initiatives requiring collaboration and integration.

In focusing on how auxiliary routines allowed people to navigate the destructiveness of organizational toxicity and perform given roles and tasks, we make two theoretical contributions. First, we develop the idea of auxiliary routines as emergent features in toxic systems. Building on the systems perspective on toxic organizations, we show how organizations systematize not only recurring toxicity but also adaptive responses to that toxicity. Auxiliary routines enable members to build and protect personal agency and to join together to navigate between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Second, we theorize how auxiliary routines shape the emotional capability of organizations—that is, the collective processes by which members attend to emotional dynamics. We theorize how auxiliary routines help members navigate, regulate, and survive the ebbs and flows of collective emotional energy in organizations, as they struggle with the opposing forces of emotional capability and handicapping. We position this study with brief reviews of working within toxic organizational conditions, and of the relationship between routines and personal agency, pointing to the need to develop grounded theory about socioemotional dynamics as an integrating perspective. We note that this perspective emerged, as can occur in inductive research, only during our data analysis rather than as an a priori guide before we entered the field.

WORKING WITHIN TOXIC CONDITIONS

The scholarly and practical writings on destructive leaders and the creation of toxic organizations depict the ill effects of sustained toxicity. Individual members can suffer potentially debilitating symptoms, such as emotional pain and distress (Frost, 2003; Webster, Brough, & Daly, 2016), demoralization (Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Mackie, 2008), and physical illness (Goldman, 2008; Tepper, 2007). Organizations sustain dysfunctional patterns of operation (Kets de Vries, 1991), the stifling of creativity and generativity (Lipman-Blumen, 2006), ineffective decision processes (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004), and reduced effectiveness in relation to primary tasks and purposes (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Scholars further note the limited responses that individuals have to toxic conditions. Members can confront—directly or via more senior leaders, governing boards, or the media—leaders who enable toxicity (Lipman-Blumen, 2006). Or, members can engage in "emotion-focused" stress coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which include avoidance, ruminating, and seeking emotional support (Webster et al., 2016). Such strategies have been found to increase rather than ameliorate negative affect, and to prevent individuals from utilizing problem-focused coping strategies (Yagil, Ben-Zur, & Tamir, 2011). Yet, members repeatedly turn to such strategies when they feel powerless to alter circumstances and are unwilling to leave altogether (Webster et al., 2016).

Key to the dynamics of toxic organizations are power and powerlessness. As certain members remain licensed to act in toxic ways, and others pressed to suffer as a result, it becomes quite clear where power and authority are located in organizations (Webster et al., 2016). Those who enact toxic behaviors have the protected space in which to do so without undue penalty; indeed, they expand their power through the regular reducing of others. As those others are belittled, bullied, and disenfranchised, they are reduced to "less than": their voices are heard less, their ideas matter less, they have less personal agency (Miller, 1993). The particular dynamics of the organization that we studied led us to question how work actually got done under such circumstances, at least well enough to maintain organizational viability; otherwise, organizations that harbor toxicity (and there are likely quite a few) would fail, some spectacularly. We assumed that, in order for work to get done, organization members, including both those who perpetuate and those who suffer toxicity, must have some personal agency. Organizations are simply too complex, and tasks too interrelated, to function on a strict command-and-control structure in which agency rests only with the most senior leaders (Dooley & Van de Ven, 1999; Hirschhorn, 1990). Degrees of personal agency appropriate to work and workers must occur. But, how, in organizations that disempower members and reduce the space for such agency?

The prevailing narrative in toxic organizations emphasizes how members make their own individual choices about how to cope with toxic conditions and destructive leadership (Webster et al., 2016). We became interested in developing theory based on a different narrative; namely, that recurring patterns of toxicity in organizations are matched by equally

recurring patterns of members navigating that toxicity. Organizational cultures are maintained through repetition: as members repeat sequences of thought and action, they reinforce the basic assumptions that anchor behavioral norms (Schein, 2010). Rather than focus solely on individuals' choices, then, we examine how recurring patterns of interrelated behavior can shape the calculus of those choices. We thus turn to the concept of routines, which offers a theoretical frame that focuses on how individual responses to organizational conditions shape and are shaped by one another in ways that are recurring, cyclical, interdependent, and useful for given tasks and roles. This theoretical shift reflects how members can join together in processes such as social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) and organizing (Weick, 1979) to make sense of and guide their behaviors. We can learn much from examining the dynamics surrounding routines in the extreme case of a complex organizational setting marked by recurring toxic behaviors.

ROUTINES AND PERSONAL AGENCY

Routines are processes by which people coordinate everyday practices within specific contexts (Becker, 2004; Feldman, 2000; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011). Routines are defined as "repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent action, carried out by multiple actors" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003: 95). A useful emphasis is on how patterns of behavior are effortful accomplishments of individuals situated within organizational contexts (Pentland & Rueter, 1994). These accomplishments emerge within specific role performances; and they are generative, enabling continuity and change (Rerup & Feldman, 2011). Scholars largely examine the routines of standard operating procedures for repeated tasks (Cyert & March, 1963), such as those involved in hiring and training (Feldman, 2000), design (Gaskin, Berente, Lyytinen, & Yoo, 2014), and invoice processing (Pentland, Hærem, & Hillison, 2011). Focal routines remain in place to the extent that they offer organization members effective and efficient ways to move ideas, information, knowledge, materials, and people from one point to another, say, or to produce repeated quality outcomes that satisfy internal and external stakeholders.

We suggest that routines serve another purpose in organizations: they *authorize* individuals to perform certain types of work, to play specific parts in ensembles that produce necessary operations, processes, and activities. Effective routines are defined by both flexibility and predictability (Feldman, 2000); they require individuals to operate on the basis of well-understood principles that create predictable patterns of action and interaction, and to use their personal discretion in applying those principles in the context of unanticipated conditions (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Rueter, 1994). Individuals who participate in work routines deemed necessary to organizational purposes have implicitly been granted the space in which to engage those routines as they see fit. They have, at least in theory, been authorized to use personal agency in the service of their work. This fits the classic definition of authority as legitimate power vested in particular people or positions for system purposes (Weber, 1947).

The reality of authorizing and personal agency, however, is more complicated. Complex political, hierarchical, group, and intergroup dynamics shape the extent to which individuals are truly authorized to enact routines as they see fit. In fact, how organization members actually work is not simply a matter of legitimation and mandate but also of what actually occurs in leader–follower interactions (Hirschhorn, 1990). In those interactions, the scope and limits of the authority of both leaders and followers are negotiated (Bendix, 1974; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). What emerges in practice are joint interpretations of authority: leaders and followers can increase or decrease one another's authority by offering or withholding legitimating support (Bass, 1990). Power, of course, and the vulnerability associated with hierarchical subordination, makes it more likely that leaders will expand or narrow the personal agency of followers than vice versa. The point here is that such authorizing dynamics can create significant gaps between the ostensive (cognitive) and performative (behavioral) aspects of organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Feldman, 2008). While organization members have in mind how a standard task routine ought to proceed, how that routine actually plays out behaviorally will depend on the extent to which individuals are authorized in particular moments to act with personal agency on behalf of that work routine.

A further complicating dynamic is recurring emotional fallout from organizational toxicity. Toxicity tends to trigger within people various levels of frustration and anger, anxiety and fear, hurt and sadness, hopelessness and despair (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Lipman-Blumen, 2006). Such negative emotions, with effects that can be both sharp and cumulative, further affect individuals' abilities and willingness to authorize themselves and act with

personal agency. Emotional fallout can trigger instincts to withdraw, defend, protect, and render the self a less visible target, rendering members less available emotionally to care about an organization that becomes identified as the source of such painful affect (Hinshelwood, 2001). That affect takes up residence, after a fashion, within members, making it more difficult to for them to consider the work itself. Emotional fallout, then, reduces psychological availability, a necessary condition for people to make their selves fully present to and engaged in their roles (Kahn, 1990). Feldman (2000: 614) noted, "Routines are performed by people who think and feel and care." Amid recurring toxicity, the space that people are able and willing to devote to thinking, feeling, and caring about organizational purposes can become greatly narrowed by painful emotional fallout. In our study, we attend not simply to performative and ostensive but also to emotional aspects of organizational routines (see Salvato & Rerup, 2011).

Organization members must thus figure out how to navigate the various dynamics related to power, authority, and emotional states that shape the space available for them to enact personal agency. The concept of "auxiliary routine" provides a starting point for thinking about how routines enable the accomplishing of focal work. Auxiliary routines offer a type of workaround—that is, an adaptation or improvisation to existing work systems that enables people to overcome, bypass, or minimize the effect of obstacles or established practices that prevent them from achieving desired efficiency or effectiveness (Alter, 2014). Sonenshein (2016) developed the concept to help explain how subsidiary routines (i.e., hiring and feedback processes) shaped the enactment of a primary focal routine (i.e., merchandising) in an organization in which success required the careful nuance of "familiar novelty." The hiring routine helped locate members who could inject creativity while regulating the merchandising process; the feedback routine allowed members to calibrate both novelty and familiarity in enacting the merchandising routine. The two auxiliary routines, in effect, mediated how the merchandising process, a routine that occurs in any number of similar organizations, could become successfully embedded in a particular organization marked by specific technological, hierarchical, and cultural structures that shaped and constrained how members engaged their work (see Howard-Grenville, 2005; Pentland, 1995). The study pointed to how auxiliary routines can be understood as repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent action carried out by multiple actors that allow focal routines to be successfully enacted within contexts that present complicating constraints.

In the present study, we theorize specific forms of auxiliary routines necessitated by socioemotional complications in organizations. In these forms, auxiliary routines emerge as behavioral sequences through which multiple actors coordinate responses to navigate the narrowing of personal agency amid toxic work conditions. In the organization that we studied, members were persistently diminished in several ways—that is, made to feel small, as "less than." In response, rather than leave the organization or risk open dissent, they developed auxiliary routines to navigate that persistent diminishment. We explore how those routines affected the space available for members to enact their primary work routines and their emotional reactions to persistent diminishment.

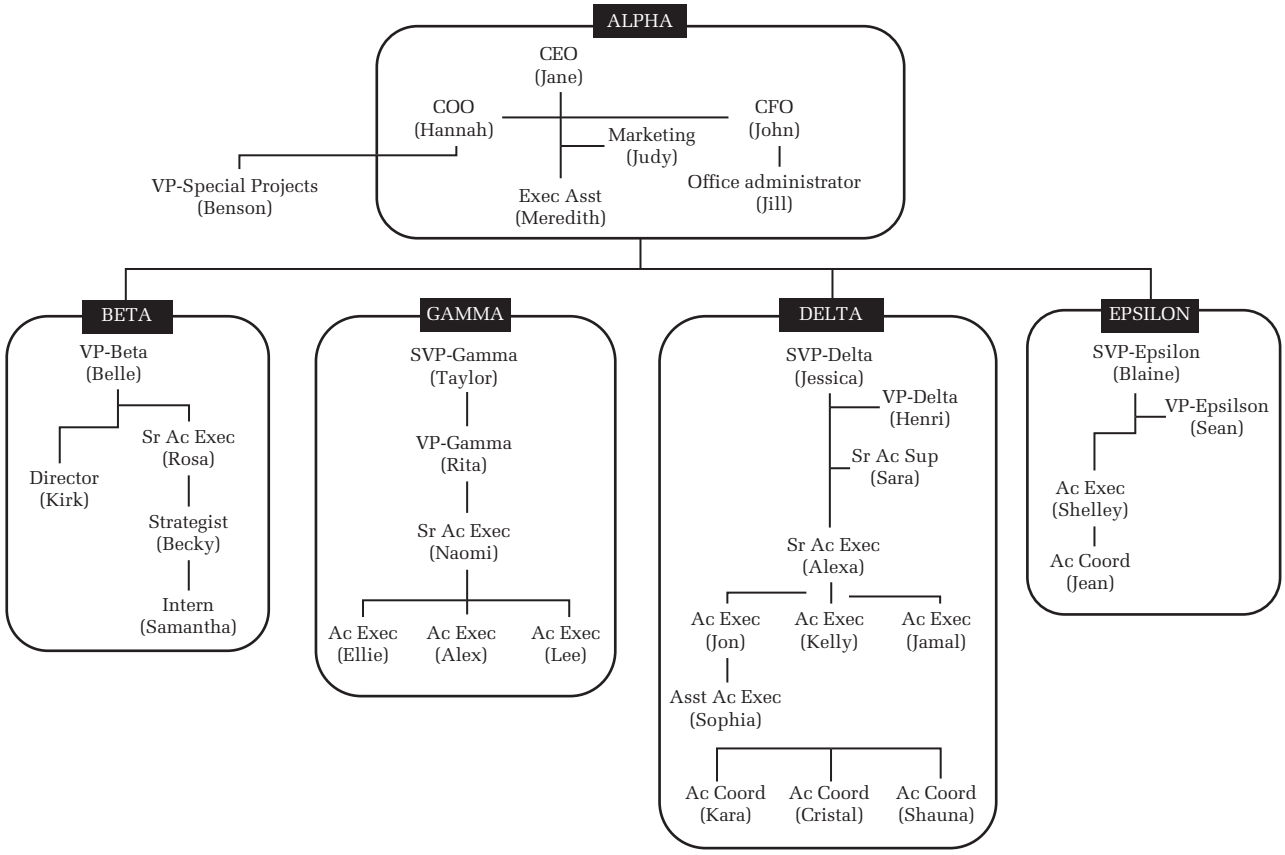
METHODS

This study of auxiliary routines emerged serendipitously (Svejenova, 2016). Our initial intention was to generate theory about the organizing of creativity within a consulting firm that had recently invested resources in developing a new product; that decision triggered uncertainty and required members to make sense of and integrate a new business area. As the research progressed, we discovered that creativity was less relevant, less possible, and less preferred within the organization than we had expected. What was quite relevant was the diminishment that people experienced in the course of their work. The imperative to accomplish work amid recurring diminishment seemed to be the challenge for members within the firm. We shifted the research question in accordance with the phenomenon the organization presented to us.

Research Setting and Data Collection

AMP, a pseudonym, is a consulting firm based in the New England area of the United States and serves clients in New England and New York. At the time of data collection, the firm had been in business for approximately 15 years and had served more than 300 clients. Members were organized around four key business areas, which we label "Beta," "Gamma," "Delta," and "Epsilon," and a senior leadership group, which we label "Alpha." Over the course of a year, we set out to engage everyone at the firm in our study including interns, account

FIGURE 1
AMP Organizational Chart



executives, account supervisors, VPs, SVPs, and senior leadership. Our sample included all 34 people employed by the organization (10 men, 24 women) during our data collection period. Figure 1 illustrates how people were arranged within key business areas. The average tenure within the firm was approximately four years and the average age of employees was 34.4 years.

During the first four months of our data collection, we participated in or observed 14.5 hours of meetings with various groups within the organization. We initiated data collection with two meetings with the senior leadership team, to understand the firm's background, how leaders were hoping to grow in the future, and the challenges they were facing. We then observed full staff meetings, business area meetings, and meetings to prepare pitches to new clients. These observations provided a deeper understanding of the dynamics within the firm and allowed us to observe how people within business areas interacted, how the business areas interacted with each other, and how the senior leadership team interacted with the business areas. The observational data provided a supplemental understanding to our interview data (Yin, 2011).

Our primary data were 57 interviews with 34 participants. Wave 1 consisted of 32 interviews (two members yet to join the firm) and Wave 2, conducted 6 months after the conclusion of Wave 1, consisted of 25 interviews (four members had left, three members were unavailable, and two new members joined). We asked all members who were currently employed at the firm to participate in Wave 2. In the spirit of grounded theory (Locke, 2001; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), questions were semi-structured and evolved over the course of data collection. Given our initial interest in creativity, early interviews focused on how people understood creativity, what inhibited or enabled creativity within the organization, what signals people received about being creative within and outside the firm, and how the incorporation of the new product and business

areas was impacting their work. We noticed in these early interviews that people were sometimes reluctant to share their perspectives and were much more focused on the challenges of getting their work done, creative or not; this triggered us to refocus on what might be driving this reluctance and their experiences of being overwhelmed and destabilized. We began to shift our interview protocol to focus on those experiences as the backdrop against which members attempted to contribute in their given roles. Given that our focus evolved over time, we felt it important to conduct a second wave of interviews to delve further into the emergent topics.

At the conclusion of our data collection, we also met with the senior leadership to share our initial findings and hear their reactions to these early interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The CEO was unable to attend that meeting, which left the COO and CFO as her representatives. They responded with a measure of interest in the findings about the complexities of the middle leader role; they were defensive in relation to the findings about the recurring diminishment that rendered those middle roles so complex. Ultimately, their defensiveness overwhelmed their interest: they defended the CEO's (and, by extension, their own) leadership, necessitated in their view by ineffective middle leaders and members unable to complete quality work. The CEO neither followed up in the wake of that report nor disseminated its contents to firm members (although, intriguingly, the CFO did follow up a year later to request a report of the findings). Our observations from this meeting provided additional evidence for our emergent theory.

Data Reduction and Analysis

As we engaged in data collection, we employed several data reduction strategies to begin to capture and make sense of the data. We completed contact summary forms (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to note emerging themes within the data. Throughout data collection, we met regularly to discuss emerging themes. These meetings were critical to modifying our interview protocol and deciding which ideas were promising to pursue further and unpack. This allowed us to use constant comparison throughout the data collection, iteratively moving between data and emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Locke, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was in the course of data reduction, for example, that we noticed that middle leaders were significantly contributing by managing and buffering the frustration and distress of others, enabling them to better accomplish their work. This iteration between data collection and reduction led us to focus on the role of contributions as a starting point for our more formal coding of the interview data, which then led us to consider the role of routines.

Our formal data coding occurred in three key steps, as we will describe next; throughout this period, we wrote research memos to explore themes throughout the data and integrate our emerging insights (Charmaz, 2006).

Step 1: Mapping the contributions of individuals. During data collection, we noticed that people engaged in at least two types of contributions—those related to work tasks and those that were more socioemotional. We coded the interviews for the different task and socioemotional contributions that people made. For example, we found that the work tasks people engaged included activities like "managing clients," "developing proposals," "responding to emails from superiors," and "attending new business meetings," while socioemotional tasks included tasks like "supporting Jane," "protecting subordinates," "providing a shoulder to cry on," and "explaining Jane's behavior." For each person, we noted his or her primary tasks and mapped this information onto the organizational chart to understand how these different tasks related to people's organizational roles. We discovered that contributions could be understood at two interrelated levels: on the surface, there was the work that members did; below the surface, in the realm of the socioemotional, there were contributions related to the recurring diminishment of members. On this underlying level, Alpha members seemed to perpetuate the diminishment of others and middle leaders attempted to manage this diminishment so that their business areas could continue to engage in work tasks (though, with further analysis, it became evident that this distinction was not so simple). This led us to focus on unpacking the nature of and responses to recurring diminishment.

Step 2: Analyzing diminishment dynamics. In our next round of coding, we focused on descriptions of behaviors and experiences of when and how people were made to feel small. We then grouped these behaviors and experiences to describe how members' roles were reduced in scope, authority, or autonomy in favor of the CEO's centrality and importance, internally and with clients. Sample codes included not being authorized to work with clients, not being backed up when clients complained, or work being taken away. We also noted how behaviors and experiences described how members were

treated as if they themselves were insignificant, incompetent, unworthy, unimportant, and in other ways "less than" the CEO, filling them with negative, painful affect. Sample codes included "yelled at for making a mistake," "yelled at for asking a question," or "received snarky emails." While the CEO was often the source of these behaviors, other members contributed to their perpetuation.

Step 3: Mapping auxiliary routines and their outcomes. We reexamined the data to understand how people responded to diminishment. Specifically, we analyzed descriptions in each group that pertained to how each of the middle leaders responded to diminishments of themselves and their group members, as well as the interactions that unfolded as a consequence. We focused on how people managed hierarchical boundaries, how group members experienced diminishment, and how people engaged their tasks and roles. We triangulated from multiple people's interviews and our own observations. We noted certain patterns of interaction and mapped out the key steps in these patterns. We revisited theory on routines and realized that the emergent routines in our data were auxiliary in that they enabled the key work routines of the organization by focusing on navigating socioemotional dynamics. We then compared and contrasted these emergent routines to one another and reconsidered the patterns in concert with the data. This helped us refine the key activities into a set of three auxiliary routines. We considered how and when different middle leaders engaged these routines and linked these routines to outcomes. For example, we considered how the routines seemed to impact the groups' attention and the latitude that members had within their jobs. We also noted what groups seemed unable to accomplish, despite senior leaders' desires for them to do so.

In developing theory about routines, we focus on situated actions within a specific organization as a way to derive more generalizable principles about such actions in other contexts. As Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) noted, this generalizing process offers not predictions but principles that explain action and offer insights useful to understand other situations grounded in other contexts. Our work thus focuses on developing not statistical generalizations and universal generalization (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), but, rather, theoretical generalizations that create usable knowledge about the situated dynamics of auxiliary routines as navigational aids through toxic landscapes.

FINDINGS

The findings presented below reflect the contextual reality of an organization in which the founder/CEO was a singular, outsized figure around which all members' activities and experiences orbited. The CEO inhabited a wide expanse at the center of the firm. Other members, regularly diminished, were afforded less space for personal agency to direct their own work. Their recurring diminishment involved being made psychologically smaller, to fit the lessened space they were afforded. It was in this context that middle leaders initiated *auxiliary routines* by which, on behalf of themselves and others, they coordinated responses to complex and enduring socioemotional dynamics that threatened to undermine standard operating task routines. We describe below such diminishment; three auxiliary routines; and the consequences for members, their work, and the organization.

Diminishment Dynamics

Jane, AMP founder and CEO, was the firm's undisputed primary figure, occupying a great deal of its space. Three organizational factors maintained her centrality: the firm's business model, decision-making processes, and structural vacuum. These factors shored up dependence on Jane and the relative unimportance of other members, whose space to enact personal agency in their roles was greatly constrained. *Role diminishment* involved recurring behaviors that reduced the size, scope, and authority of people's roles. Other recurring dynamics—Jane's aggression and the collusion of key members—maintained members' *psychological diminishment* by treating them personally as "less than." Both types of diminishment were located in the system rather than in simply a destructive leader (see Padilla et al., 2007). We describe and illustrate these system dynamics below (see also Table 1).

CEO centrality and role diminishment. Jane's unqualified centrality was reinforced by a *business model* that featured the promise of the CEO's personal attention to clients. As Kara, an account coordinator, noted, clients "view her [Jane] as the face of the company. … They want her involved, because she's the head honcho. They feel, obviously, attention from her attention." That Jane was "the face of the company" meant that other members were relegated to the background; even as they were the ones actually doing the client work, Jane existed at the center of client relationships. Jessica, leader of the

TABLE 1
Role and Psychological Diminishment

Factors that facilitate diminishment dynamics	Illustration
The impact of the *business model* on *CEO centrality* and *role diminishment*	I think when it comes down to it, and a lot of times this is an issue because they'll [clients] send out an e-mail or they'll have a call, and they just call Jane … and I'm left in this balance of "Oh, I didn't know that happened." Part of it is they love the fact they can get Jane on the phone. How often can you get a CEO of a company on the phone? I think that there's definitely a difference there. It doesn't hurt my feelings anymore, but I do feel a little behind the learning curve when they're doing these things. (Naomi, Gamma)
	You want your owner and team to stick up for you and have that united front. You want to know that, "Hey, I know you're doing good work. This was a particularly difficult situation. You handled it as best you could. Next time, let's do this. I've got you. I'm sticking up for you." Because, when your senior vice president is trying not to get yelled at by the CEO, how can they defend you and your team against a client if necessary? The anger is coming at you from email, and from in person. Your client's mad at you. They're getting phone calls and emails. They're mad at you, and the CEO's mad at you. (Judy, Alpha)
	I think certain clients really hire us for that, and they're aware of that, so they want to—and then they kind of, certain clients, instead of going directly to the team, such as the more difficult one, will call her [Jane] with a complaint. I don't necessarily want to get those calls, but it just starts up there and it goes down. (Alexa, Delta)
The impact of the *decision-making process* on *CEO centrality* and *role diminishment*	I like Greg, and he brings a lot of knowledge that we don't have, but I think he just doesn't get that Jane and Hannah are the people who have to bless it, and, if they don't bless it and they're not happy, they're going to make your life miserable, and you're not going to be able to get the leeway. (Belle, Beta)
	It doesn't matter how good it is. It doesn't matter how much sense it makes to you as your experience has told you. If they [Jane and Hannah] don't like it, it doesn't go anywhere. I don't blame them. Their name is on it. Their literal name is on it. Of course they're going to want to see it. Of course they want to know. I don't blame them, but it's just, sometimes, it would be nice to be like, "Listen, for me, this isn't exactly what I want, but, okay, let's try it your way." Just every once in a while, "Okay, let's try it your way." (Rosa, Beta)
	It's like, okay, well, you [Jane] say you know that usually whatever I give you is good, why do you still have to see it? A lot of things get bottlenecked that don't need to. The client will be, like, "Well, where's this proposal?" It's gummed up because they have to read it. I feel like we could be quicker to get things done if we didn't have to send everything for approval. (Belle, Beta)
The impact of the *structural vacuum* on *CEO centrality* and *role diminishment*	I haven't ever been asked to brainstorm on anything beyond Gamma's area. (Rita, Gamma)
	Right, and then we have monthly staff meetings, but they're always—they're always getting moved and they're always cancelled. I think we've had two, maybe, since I've started. They're supposed to be monthly. (Samantha, Beta)
	It takes a lot of time to organize a [firm-wide brainstorm] to get the whole firm together and just come up with ideas. I think that people who know their clients the best might be more inclined to just want to keep it focused on their team, so that they can get it done faster. (Alex, Gamma)
	It happens with projects, too. I don't know—which is probably on purpose just for our sake—but I don't know what the other half of [client] is doing and we're on the same account. I don't know what the traditional side is pitching or what is coming up on their end. (Becky, Beta)
	There's a lack of understanding who's doing what and why certain people are doing what. God dammit, there's absolutely no HR in this fuckin' office. I mean, that blows my mind—right? (Shelley, Epsilon)
The relationship between *CEO aggression* and *psychological diminishment*	It would be an email match back and forth, angry. It would be an angry back-and-forth email. If I had said, "I knew that you [Jane] were at the event last night. You said all along you were gonna look at it on Friday morning, which is when I was gonna send it to you." Even that innocuous would have been the start of something. Then it wouldn't have stopped there. She would have complained to Hannah about me and anyone else who crosses her path about something. (Judy, Alpha)
	I would tell you that I'm a little burned because the first time I brought in business and I sent Jane and Hannah a pleasant email about the business I was soliciting, and Jane sends me a snarky email back about how I didn't follow the process to bring in new business. I'm like,

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Factors that facilitate diminishment dynamics	Illustration
	"Cool, let me try harder for you." I mean, it's just like, between there not being a process, and then being that with attitude. You're just like, "Why do I fucking care?" (Shelley, Epsilon)
	You're a favorite one day and then you are just not a favorite the next day. … It's just, like, nobody is safe from getting fire drill e-mails and just kind of condescending. I have watched everybody go through it. I have watched a lot of people fall. A lot of people, I have rubbed a lot of backs. (Kelly, Delta)
	Because it was really nasty. I, that day, basically said that if I ever get spoken to [by Jane] like that again or treated like that again, I'm out. I don't want to be management. I don't want to be here. Because it's toxic. It makes me crazy. (Jessica, Delta)
The impact of *collusions*	Jane and I spend time together. We have a standing Thursday night dinner, and sometimes we're bitching about what we're not happy about. … She's half empty, I'm glass half full. Together, we have a full glass. That's very much who we are. I think we're good for each other in that respect. (Hannah, Alpha)
	We had a scavenger hunt. … It was a lot of fun, and it was good, and it was pretty funny and all that. Anyway, at the end of the day, the MVP was awarded to Jane. [*Laughter*] It's just like—not only did—she probably didn't deserve it, but, even more than that, I don't think that's really building a sense of community, a sense that the whole firm matters if you're giving the MVP of the scavenger hunt to the CEO. Right? (Benson, Delta)
	I know I'm valued. I know that I need to help them, help Jane and Hannah. That's the most important thing at the end of the day. I help them get things done and then try and be a buffer for them and try and be a buffer for everyone else to them. Make sure things try and continue to move along. (Judy, Alpha)

Delta group, reflected on what it meant, in terms of her own tangentiality and the attendant sense of betrayal and hurt, when "her" clients went around her and reached out to Jane:

> It [client system] was mine, mine, mine, until one day the client didn't like something and said [to the CEO], "Jane, you're not paying attention." If the client didn't like something, I would have been perfectly happy to talk to him about it and deal with it, rather than him feel he had to go to Jane. I don't think she has done enough to anoint me in that to say like, "You don't need me."

Jessica offered another example of role diminishment, with another client:

> He's [client] a tough guy and he rips everything and then he calls Jane and says like, "That shouldn't have come to me. That was poorly written down." The thing he complained about was written by us, edited by his people, and approved before it went up to him. He just thought we had written it, and so then he calls Jane and says, "I expect better from you." That makes her insecure and we all have to play a little defense on that client.

Firm members were not only relegated to the background in such instances but were further diminished by Jane's insistence on their "playing defense," or accommodating client demands regardless of how reasonable they might be. When clients made Jane "insecure," she pushed on members, not on clients themselves, leaving members feeling unsupported, hurt, and angry.

Jane's insecurity in relation to client retention and growth led to *decision-making processes* that featured her centrality. She feared failure, noting, "I would say fear of losing clients, for Hannah [COO] and I, is huge. [Initially] we would just get clients, screw it up, lose them; get clients, screw it up, lose them." Amid pressure to ensure the firm's viability, keep staff members busy, and soothe demanding clients, Jane sought control. As Belle, leader of the Beta group, said, "She [Jane] likes to have her hand in everything, which is hard for everyone because we can't do anything that doesn't have her sign off. … Even if you want to write something, or take the initiative to do something, it's got to be vetted through [her]." Jane insisted on seeing written work and presentations multiple times prior to their being released to clients. Her constant centrality constricted others; as Judy, director of marketing, said:

> It manifests in a number of different ways, but it's always looped back to Jane. How the client looks at us, how her name is on the work. If the client's mad at us, she's mad at our team. There's no safe space, or safe zone there. There's no unified front.

The implications here were not simply operational, with Jane as the bottleneck, slowing

decisions, but psychological as well, as members experienced their leader as against rather than with them ("mad at us … no unified front") in ways that left them with "no safe space." Firm members, fearful, felt pressure to focus intently on accommodating Jane.

Jane's centrality was further maintained by a *vacuum of organizational structures* that, if present, would have lessened members' dependence on her. The lack of structured interdependence across groups, for example, meant that members had little visibility into other areas. Note how Sara, a Delta account supervisor, struggled, with little success, to make sense of the firm's operations, leaving her (and us) confused:

> I honestly don't even know who … I don't even know who runs that [project]. Like the contracts, I think it's probably Jane and John. But I'm sure she [Jane] told the Delta team. There is that disconnect between Delta and Beta, who is like on some accounts but not really on some accounts and doesn't really get the—not in those emails that go to Delta. … It's just a lot of different moving parts that aren't always one machine.

The confusion and frustration inherent in such "disconnect" maintained Jane as the hub. The disparate groups ("the different moving parts") were disconnected spokes of the "machine" unable to join together, absent Jane, to coordinate and collaborate on their work. The absence of a formal human resources function in the firm further maintained Jane's centrality. As Shelley described, "There's no path to professional self-discovery and promotion. There's no encouraging for you to independently take steps to be proactive to improve yourself in the organization. … There is no forethought put into the structure around people." Members remained dependent on Jane, unable to "independently take steps," which left them regularly frustrated and hopeless.

CEO aggression and psychological diminishment. Members were also regularly diminished, psychologically, by Jane's *aggression*. Rather than contain her anxiety—that is, become aware of and verbalize it to others in ways that created the space for connection—Jane acted it out, projecting it upon others in the form of personal attack. As Judy noted, "She [Jane] wears her emotion on her sleeve, and she expels that to everyone else. She does it all the time about everyone. If she's mad at someone she'll go in everyone's office and talk shit about that person." In such moments, Jane silenced others, shutting them down, pressing them to take up minimal space. She did so via email as well. As Jessica further described:

> She gets so much value out of putting down others. It is just evident every day.

> Oh, you know what the [email] tone is and it's terrible. Terrible tone, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes very rapid fire … you get like *ba*, *ba*, *ba*, *ba*, *ba*, like five [emails], with five different thoughts. Which is jarring. Especially if it's in the morning and they're coming at you.

Jane's aggressiveness—like "rapid fire … coming at you"— was particularly acute when she felt that firm members were acting without her. She then targeted what she perceived as their incompetence, disloyalty, or dishonesty. As Shelley, an Epsilon member, described:

> Something did not happen to Jane's satisfaction … we didn't tell her about a new business item. Her way of dealing with that was putting me in a room, and, when I say grilling, I mean I have not been put under a hot seat like that since skipping school in high school. Aggressively spitting questions at me, including, "Don't lie to me, Shelley." As though I would lie to her.

In such instances—which occurred not just privately but also publicly, in front of other members and with clients—Jane was, in the way of a classic toxic leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2006), "putting down others" in ways that diminished them, suppressed their ideas and voices, and left them angry and hurt. The hurt was real; as Kelly noted, "I have watched people get broken down and kind of realize what a tough culture this can be. It softens them a bit or it just drives them insane." Jane's belittling of others can be understood as her unconscious "locating" of pressure, anxiety, and fear in them; unable to contain her anxiety, she acted it out, perhaps in the unconscious wish that others would "hold" it on her behalf, to relieve her of its burden or make it more bearable (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). In that respect, Jane needed others, as objects to diminish; they, in turn, felt (her) anger, fear, and hurt. The result was unsurprising; as Jessica noted, "It's really toxic here. That's the last thing I'm gonna say to you. It's really toxic."

Collusion. Jane was at the center of a toxic "reactor" of sorts, emitting role and psychological diminishment that triggered painful emotional fallout for members. The reactor depended on key members of Alpha, the senior leadership group, regularly *colluding* with and reinforcing Jane's centrality and aggression (see Padilla et al., 2007). The primary

collusive relationship was between Jane and Hannah, who together had split off from a previous firm to create AMP. Hannah was, as Blaine (Epsilon leader) noted, "hugely protective of Jane if she feels anybody's attacking her." Hannah excused Jane's aggression by noting how much pressure she was under, not just professionally, with the need to "meet payroll," but also personally. As Hannah observed, "I don't go home every night and every morning and deal with what she does [aging parents]. It's only gotten harder. It has financial implications for [Jane]. I don't have that either. … I don't have that stressor all the time." Hannah routinely chose to collude with rather than confront Jane about toxic behaviors. As Hannah noted, "I think I just, on a daily basis, I think, 'Do I need to tell her [Jane] now? Because now's probably not the time when she's gonna hear it.'" In choosing to withhold observations, Hannah maintained Jane's centrality and sacrificed others. Other members observed that choice; as Shelley noted, "Hannah has decided that she will be the apologist and just buy into it. Well, you either collude or you leave."

Collusion also occurred in the form of a more classically codependent relationship between Jane and Judy, the marketing director. In this relationship, the two formed an abuser–abused pairing. Judy described her own diminishment:

> Being interrupted. Not being able to explain yourself. Never explain yourself. You can never explain yourself. There's never two sides to a story. It's just falling on your sword. I'm saying "fall on the sword" and just letting it go and being the beaten dog for that hour because that makes her [Jane] feel better.

Judy's rationalization for her being the "beaten dog" was that it made Jane "feel better." Judy also believed that her closeness with Jane, as it was, helped others; as Judy said, "I can remedy things. I can anticipate things. I can do my best to avoid things to happen or continue to roll out of control." In fact, however, her collusion (like that of Hannah) prevented Jane from learning of her effect on others, as if she were too fragile to handle the reality.

So too did Alpha members as they pressed others to defer to Jane's judgments without question. As Benson observed, reporting on an interaction with the senior leadership team about a strategic decision, "This is the first place that I've ever been made to feel like there are a lot of dumb questions, and you shouldn't be asking them." The collusions of Alpha leaders to silence the voices of others were, in effect, sacrifices offered to maintain Jane's exalted status. Members were thus left to bear the brunt of amplified stress and anxiety within the firm. As Jean, an account coordinator, said:

> I can see the stress that is put on everybody else from the stress that they [Alpha] feel. It's … like an offloading onto others. It's a coping tactic, mechanism. Instead of dealing with it and saying is it worthwhile to be this stressed out about—like, do I have control over this?—it's yelling or making snarky comments to somebody else. … It creates an environment of high anxiety and high stress that, whether it's conscious or not, is picked up by everybody else in the office.

The "yelling or … snarky comments" narrowed the space that members were willing to inhabit, as they sought to make themselves smaller targets for offloaded stress.

Auxiliary Routines

In response to recurring role and psychological diminishment of members, middle leaders developed ways to work with and around Jane that let them carve out the space to accomplish their tasks while protecting themselves or others. The middle leaders did so by initiating three auxiliary routines to navigate the need to accomplish work amid the recurring diminishment. These routines enabled the firm to adapt to diminishment as a fixed condition of its culture and processes. The auxiliary routines made hierarchical boundaries more, or less, permeable, which shaped and contextualized the focal routines of serving, managing, and developing clients. The primary auxiliary routine enacted by middle leaders was *absorption*; at other times, middle leaders also enacted *dissemination* or *differentiation* routines. We describe the three auxiliary routines and their consequences below (see also Table 2).

Absorption. The primary auxiliary routine at play in AMP was "absorption." In this routine, the middle leaders put themselves between their group members and whatever, or whomever, threatened role and psychological diminishment. They held impermeable as best they could the boundary between senior leaders and their group members; this left them to absorb and manage rather than pass on diminishment and its emotional repercussions. They sought to create temporary shelters for others, protective spaces that would enable those others to do work without becoming overly preoccupied with Jane. The middle leaders absorbed Jane's attention; they kept her as a central focus so others would not have to do so. When that proved impossible, middle leaders tended to the pained emotional experiences

TABLE 2
Sequences of Auxiliary Routines

Auxiliary routine	Absorption	Dissemination	Differentiation
Middle leaders enacting routine	Belle (Beta); Naomi, Rita (Gamma); Jessica (Delta); Blaine (Epsilon)	Taylor (Gamma); Jessica (Delta)	Blaine, Sean (Epsilon)
Middle leader purposes	Create protective spaces, enabling others' work (default auxiliary routine)	Protect the self in moments of overwhelm and struggle	Establish ownership of client work, leveraging a distinct base of power
Sequence	1. Middle leaders received and absorbed diminishment. 2. Middle leaders provided emotional support, sense-giving, and perspective to group members. 3. Middle leaders distanced themselves from senior executives. 4. Middle leaders implicitly reinforced the status quo of diminishment.	1. Middle leaders embraced Alpha expectations about client service and growth. 2. Middle leaders dismissed group members' struggles. 3. Middle leaders blamed group members and contributed to their diminishment. 4. Middle leaders justified the CEO's centrality and aggression toward others.	1. Middle leaders cultivated distinct networks. 2. Middle leaders used external relationships to physically separate, themselves and members, from organization dynamics. 3. Group members created significant intragroup work attachments, minimizing their need for connections to senior leaders. 4. Group members emotionally disconnected from senior leaders.
Impact on diminishment dynamics	Maintains recurring diminishment	Amplifies recurring diminishment	Separates from diminishment

of others. The absorption routine involved the following four-part sequence.

First, middle leaders *received and absorbed* diminishment, reducing its impact on others. They acted as "buffers," layers of protective insulation. Jessica described herself as a "mama bear … to protect them as best I can and make sure that they're valued, and supported, and not steamrolled." She observed:

> It requires a little bit of dancing. I act a lot of the times as a buffer between senior ownership and staff. … She [Jane] writes something, then she thinks of something else that may contradict it or may be additive or may be rude and unnecessary. [Then Jane says] "I shouldn't have said that out loud." She doesn't have a filter. What do I do here? I buffer. I buffer between them [Alpha] and them [Delta members]. That is a huge part of my job. *That is a huge part of my job, is taking that so they don't have to.* (Our emphasis)

Middle leaders at AMP compensated for what Jane was unable to do—in this case, to "filter." This was "a huge part of [the] job," to absorb unfiltered material likely to diminish more vulnerable members. Group members appreciated the protection. As Rosa, Beta account executive, noted, "I have Belle as the buffer. She is getting a lot of that, I think, and she tends to deflect a lot of that, which I value. … She takes a lot of shit, quite frankly." Absorption required middle leaders to contain rather than act out their own emotional reactions. As Blaine observed, "I can play any game if you tell me the rules, but I can't play a game if the rules change. I'm furious right now over something last night that's done that, and I owe it to these kids to not be furious about things." Blaine's containing rather than sharing his anger enabled his group members to focus on their work rather than on his emotional reactions. Middle leaders, as buffers, were "circuit breakers," absorbing rather than conducting toxic, destructive energy.

Second, middle leaders provided *emotional support, sense-giving, and perspective* in order to mitigate diminishment. Rita, who had been the interim leader of Gamma until Taylor joined the firm, made herself emotionally available to group members:

> I talk to her [Naomi]: "How was your, how are things going with you? What do you have going on?" Then, "How are Alex and Ellie doing?" I try to check in with her, if not every day, then usually, at least, every other day. Just not formal or anything; more like I just go in and, "Hey, how's it going?"

Such "check-ins" from Rita enabled Naomi herself to remain available emotionally, when she and others could not fully buffer Jane's aggression. As Naomi described, "I've had people cry in my office.

It's just a closed space. You can do whatever you want. I think, because I'm a mom, they feel like—and it's fine with me." Middle leaders stepped into the gap to provide positive reinforcement, enabling members to feel seen and valued; as Shelley noted, "Blaine … will say things like, 'Good job,' or, 'Thanks for doing that.'" Middle leaders also offered necessary perspective. As Shauna, Delta account coordinator, said:

> One thing that Sara has always said to me which is really important is that we're not brain surgeons. … I think that's very important to remember is that, at the end of the day, what we do is important, but, at the same time, it's, if you take a step back, it can also be fine.

The "step back" was crucial for middle leaders to provide for group members, enabling them to distance psychologically and emotionally. Middle leaders also filtered information so as to let in useful rather than distracting information and feedback. As Kelly described her role, she invoked images of danger, saying, "I'm very strategic in knowing how to—if we're going with the bomb theme—navigate the minefield. I hear some people come in and sometimes they say things and I'm listening, and I'm like, 'That's not gonna go—that's not gonna go over well.'" In the absorption routine, middle leaders like Kelly helped others "navigate" their ways across the "minefield" marking the territory between them and Alpha.

Third, middle leaders *distanced themselves* from senior executives, for self-protection and respite. They did so physically, staying away from the Alpha group's warren of offices. Jill observed, "It [Alpha area] was like this threshold, [it] kind of had an invisible electronic buzzer, like people didn't want to come through it." Shelley observed about Sara, a member who worked in a remote location, that she was able to "avoid a lot" and "would be gone if she weren't away … a 200-mile separation from Jane." Middle leaders also grew quiet in meetings with Alpha leaders. Benson, VP of special projects, said, "Have I had to bite my tongue? Well, yeah, I have a wife and kid. I'm not gonna storm out of here." And they distanced virtually, as Jessica described:

> They're back-and-forth conversations [emails] at night that she [Jane] writes without thinking and often come off to be a little snarky or a little judgmental. You're like, "You know what, I'm just going to bed. I want to stop this now."

Such distance—physical, verbal, virtual—enabled middle leaders to survive as best they could an environment that members regularly described as "toxic."

Fourth, middle leaders implicitly *reinforced the status quo* of diminishment. Their distancing maintained rather than disconfirmed Alpha leaders' perceived needs for Jane's centrality, and for the diminishment of members. Observe Jane's reaction to middle leaders' distancing:

> Knock on the door, for God's sakes. Walk down here. It's not a big deal. I come out. I emerge a couple of times basically to walk down to say, "Are you monitoring the media?" Jessica says, "Can I help?" Okay, I guess I could have stopped in that moment. But, really, at your level? You know what you could do. Do I then have to think about what you could do to help? Just come in. It's not IBM. That's what's continually missing, this waiting for the invitation.

The quote points to how middle leaders distanced themselves from Jane, who, fuming at their lack of initiative ("this waiting for the invitation"), sought them out to mark whether they are doing their jobs, which they experienced as further diminishment. The cycle continued unabated. As Rita noted, Alpha leaders acted as if "they don't believe that we're actually doing it [client service] when we are," a belief seemingly confirmed when middle leaders, worn out by buffering and soothing group members, distanced themselves from senior executives as well. In so doing, they maintained Jane's centrality and diminishment of themselves and others.

Dissemination. At times, middle leaders abandoned absorption in favor of "dissemination." In this auxiliary routine, several middle leaders moved closer to Jane and away from group members. These middle leaders, Taylor and Jessica, led Gamma and Delta, respectively; these groups were the sites of ambiguity and tension over who "owned" the clients, whom Jane and Hannah had brought over from a previous firm. The dissemination routine represented moments in which Taylor and Jessica chose to protect themselves rather than group members. Worn down by the constant struggle to buffer others from Jane or wishing to gain more access to the resources that she controlled, they contributed to rather than buffered members from diminishment. This involved the following four-part sequence.

First, middle leaders *embraced Alpha expectations* about client service and growth. Taylor, the newly hired SVP, joined Gamma with the explicit expectation that he would grow the business. He understood that his success at the firm was predicated on his satisfying that expectation. As he noted,

"[A] big part of what I need to do here is obviously bring in new business and growing existing accounts." He was ambitious in his reach, saying, "Candidly, I feel like we could be doing more national accounts too. I'd like to push us that way." Jessica, the longstanding SVP of Delta, was more grudging in her embrace of Jane's expectations. She had some discomfort with Jane's intense focus on profit, noting, "When I go in to talk [to Jane] about client stuff, it's 'Oh you got the client stuff, but where's the money?' … That's what she's about. I would care more about doing good work and growing existing clients." Yet Jessica made herself available to Jane, even at some personal cost. As she noted, "I'm always available. I have only taken two vacations … where I've actually left the country and turned off my phone."

Second, middle leaders *dismissed group members' struggles*. Taylor ignored the deleterious ways in which he contributed to the struggles of Gamma members. As Rita observed, "It's one more person [Taylor] giving them [Ellie and Alex] more stuff, and not entirely understanding what else they have going on." Naomi offered an example:

> Taylor sent out an email at 12:20 a.m. recently, saying, "Here's an article. I flagged it to them. Please send to our client ASAP." When I read that at 07:00 in the morning, I was like "Did he mean for us, at 01:00 a.m.?" I was very confused. I really had to figure out how I was going to confront him on this. He was not very receptive, which was really hard for me to deal with. … Sean and Alex both came to me, they're like "Was I supposed to be up? I didn't know we were monitoring for this. I didn't know what was going on." They're really upset.

Jessica too would pass on rather than buffer stress and anxiety. Sophia observed, "I think at times you can tell when … Jessica is feeling pressure because I'm getting more pressure. I can tell that it's coming from above." Rather than maintain the boundary, and continue to buffer, protect, and nurture group members, Jessica would, as Kelly noted, "send everyone into a tailspin" and then dismiss their struggles and difficult emotional experiences. Jessica did so to lessen the pressure she felt from Jane. In such moments, these middle leaders stepped aside, and let, in the words of several members, "the crazy" settle directly onto group members.

Third, middle leaders *blamed* group members and contributed to their diminishment. In this routine, Taylor mirrored Jane's negativity, projecting it toward Gamma members. Ellie described a back-and-forth exchange with Taylor, for example, involving a deadline for a project deliverable. As she reflected on an email from him: "The way he worded it, it was like—it was snarky. … I told you I'd get it to you [Taylor] by noon. If I didn't get it to you by noon, why didn't—the next day—then check in with me." Jessica too would focus on the negative; as Sophia said, "You hear [from Jessica] about why things didn't get done or why things got done wrong versus 'great story' or 'great job.'" Jessica shifted from buffering to blaming Delta members, to the point that they found she and Jane indistinguishable. As Shauna described:

> When they're [Jane and Jessica] not there, then it's like, "Why weren't you looking at this?" or "Why weren't you paying attention to this?" It's like, "Well, because we're doing a million other things at the same time." I find that that's when blame sort of shoves downward. … I think Jessica is a blaming environment stimulator.

In creating a "blaming environment stimulator," in which blame settled on others rather than on themselves, the middle leaders diminished those others, exacerbating painful emotional fallout.

Fourth, middle leaders *justified* the CEO's centrality and aggression. In internalizing, acting out, and amplifying diminishment, the middle leaders solidified a status quo in which, for the moment, they were on Jane's "side," less likely to be diminished themselves. As Kelly observed, with some frustration and anger:

> That's the problem with Jane getting really involved is that it just—she just freaks out about things. When everyone starts to get involved and she [Jessica] overreacts to stuff, it just turns into whole fire drill that is completely unnecessary. We kind of create problems for ourselves. Oh, "Why did the client see this article five minutes before you did?" It's like, well, that happens sometimes. If the clients don't accept like why are we—we create our own drama.

Implicit in this description is the middle leader (Jessica) justifying rather than mitigating the "drama," whose plot was the maintaining of Jane's centrality at the expense of others. This drama was not so much created as regularly recreated, over and again, within the dissemination routine. At those moments, middle leaders reaffirmed Jane as the primary driver of the business model and the center of decisions regarding clients. When Taylor focused exclusively on goals for client service and acquisition, ignoring the emotional fallout on his members, he was implicitly justifying Jane's centrality, her uncontained aggression, and recurring diminishment of others. Consequently, the dissemination routine

served to amplify Jane's centrality and aggression and the diminishment of others.

Differentiation. At other moments, middle leaders shifted from absorption to "differentiation." In this auxiliary routine, middle leaders created boundaries that separated and differentiated their group, making them and their subordinates less available to become diminished and emotionally pained. Middle leaders made this shift under certain conditions: their focal routines were distinct from those under the purview of Alpha leaders; they had a distinct base of power, in the form of their own clients; and they were successful in growing their particular business, enabling the firm to profit. The Epsilon group met these criteria. Epsilon represented a distinct client service; its leader, Blaine, brought with him an intact set of clients; and Epsilon was successful at growing its segment of the business. These factors afforded Epsilon a certain separation within the firm and from Alpha itself, via the following four steps of the differentiation routine.

First, these middle leaders *cultivated distinct networks*. Blaine developed a set of key relationships with actors outside the firm that became instrumental to Epsilon's work, and, in so doing, had a base of power that did not owe its allegiance to Alpha leaders. As he described:

> I have editors I can call and people that have been reporters for 10, 15 years. But I knew them when they were Joe Shit, the writing man, and so was I. We were having a beer … and saying, "Someday we're going to do—" whatever. Well, now I'm the SVP here, and he's the political editor of the [newspaper].

Sean, the recently hired Epsilon VP, similarly created a distinct network, noting, "Like, the reporters are all my drinking buddies, generally … [and] the politicians, I play softball with." While these networks were in the service of work, they also created for these leaders a source of power that justified their differentiation. With less contested territory (i.e., clients), Jane and Alpha had less valid claims over Epsilon and its members, which permitted more separation and less diminishment.

Second, middle leaders *used external relationships to physically separate from organizational dynamics*. Blaine spent much of his work efforts outside the office and encouraged others to do so as well. He said, "That's what I do, I network, and I get around." He elaborated:

> I'm just around everything. … I'm old school. I like to go up to the bar and have a few drinks, and hang out with everybody and talk ragtime. That's when you do the work. I still walk the halls in the Statehouse. I have to. That's where I make my money, not sitting here talking to you.

Blaine believed that, as Shelley noted, "People need to get out of the office and do that [networking]. Blaine's coming in and [asking] 'Why is everybody at their desk?' That's weird." Remaining outside the office not only permitted Epsilon members to accomplish their work, it also created a barrier that shielded them from diminishment and its effects.

Third, group members *created significant intragroup work attachments* that minimized their need to connect to senior leaders. Blaine and Shelley, who worked together prior to joining the firm, created such an attachment. As Blaine reflected:

> I'm like a ship going through, and she [Shelley] just picks up whatever the fuck comes along in the wake that I'm supposed to pay attention to and then reminds me of what I'm supposed to pay attention to. … She's amazing. She's very smart, up and comer, and I rely on her a lot, a lot.

In this routine, Epsilon members attached to their group leader rather than to the organization as a whole. Blaine encouraged this, noting, "My job is to make them … like, I see that you're doing a good job. Believe in me." He provided group members with a differentiated group and offered himself as the means for attachment ("Believe in me"). Jane noticed this, remarking, "He's [Blaine] got a little marching around with 'my team and my people,' and we have counseled him against that … it doesn't send a good message." The "message" sent was that the Epsilon group could (and should) be an alternative source of attachment for its members.

Fourth, group members *emotionally disconnected from senior leaders*. Shelley was quite clear about remaining distant from Jane, noting:

> She [Jane] has said to Blaine, "I can't read Shelley. I can tell she's holding back with me." I'm like, "Yeah, I'm holding back with you. I don't know what you're going to say about me. … I don't know how you're going to judge me based on—the only thing I want you to judge me on is my work product at this point."

The differentiation routine placed "the work product" at the center of the relationship between Alpha leaders and Epsilon members: as long as the latter were successful in attracting and retaining clients, there was latitude in how physically and emotionally distant they could remain.

Choices and Consequences

Auxiliary routines are interesting to the extent that they shape and illustrate how focal routines are embedded in a broader context (Howard-Grenville, 2005; Sonenshein, 2016). The three auxiliary routines described above shaped how AMP members served, retained, and developed clients within the broader context of recurring diminishment. Middle leaders made certain choices, consciously and not, as they navigated between opposing needs to maintain Jane's centrality and authorize themselves and others to do work. In this section, we examine more closely the nature of those choices and their consequences for members and their work, and for the firm's growth.

Members and work. The three routines represented variation on how able members were to freely engage their work on their own terms versus remain preoccupied with boundaries, emotional fallout, and authorized space to exercise personal agency. Key to this process were the choices that middle leaders made, as they struggled with contradictory dictates to de-authorize versus authorize themselves and group members. Their choices initiated specific auxiliary routines. Which auxiliary routine was enacted at any particular moment in time was a function of how well and for how long middle leaders were able to protect themselves or others from diminishment. Each auxiliary routine held implications for the extent to which role and psychological diminishment was, in the moment, offset or perpetuated.

We begin with *absorption*, the most prevalent auxiliary routine. Middle leaders chose to insert themselves between Jane (and Alpha more generally) and group members; they absorbed diminishment to enable others to do work. This provided group members with the authorized space needed to serve clients within given constraints. As Ellie described, in relation to her daily work, "I write the blog posts for [client], and at first I was just looking at old blogs. I mean okay, blah-blah, I'll just write it similar to that. Then Rita would be, 'Just be creative with it. Do what you want'. … I mean, it's creative, but at the same time it's creative inside this template." Rita provided latitude for Ellie to engage the task on her own terms, within limits, to be "creative inside this template." Implicit in this latitude was Rita's construction of a temporary shelter for Ellie to engage her task as she saw fit. The absorption routine enabled bounded agency: members engaged their work within circumscribed limits developed by middle leaders, negotiated with and against Alpha leaders. The routine enabled middle leaders to hold the space necessary for members to engage work on their own terms. The effects of diminishment were held at some remove from members that were offered, figuratively, temporary fallout shelters.

Yet, even as they enacted bounded agency, members were aware of the barely contained forces of diminishment in the near distance. They understood the constant threat that absorption would fail, forcing them to turn to satisfying Jane rather than their clients or themselves. As Kelly noted, "She [Jane] just gets really nervous about stuff and sends e-mails and it ends up turning into more e-mailing her than where you're supposed to be focused." Aware that Jane's becoming "nervous" could circumvent absorption processes, members remained partly preoccupied with Jane and the threat of diminishment. The threat could be real or not, depending on the extent of Jane's anxiety and the strength of absorption. As Rosa reflected:

> How do I know if I'm doing a good job? No one's yelling. No one's like, "Where is this?" It depends on the day. Some days, I feel like I'm doing a good job and I've got it together, and then other days, it's like, "Where's this? Where's this? Where's this? Where's this?" and I'm like, "I guess I suck. Okay."

The difference between the days that members experienced themselves as working well or badly was, more often than not, a matter of the strength of absorption relative to the intensity of the diminishment. When middle leaders were able to maintain protective insulation and tend others' emotions, they brought relief, helping those others to feel that they have "got it together." When Jane was in full force, aided by Alpha collusions, middle leaders could not sustain absorption, leaving others with the sense that they "suck."

The *dissemination* routine increased members' preoccupation with their leaders' stress and anxiety, narrowing the space available for personal agency. When middle leaders enabled and amplified anxiety and stress, members' work was subverted. As Kelly described:

> At one point, Jane was telling Jessica that she wants two e-mail updates a day on this one [client project]. It just is like updates, updates, updates. We send updates at the end of the week to both [Jane and Jessica]. That stuff is time consuming. Then there is always criticism of the updates. They should do more of this. They should do more of that. … She [Jane] just gets really nervous about stuff and sends e-mails and it ends up turning into more e-mailing her than where you're supposed to be focused.

Jessica acquiesced to Jane's anxiety, accommodating rather than buffering her requests for constant updates. In effect, Jessica moved up to join Jane rather than remain in the difficult space that the absorption routine demanded of the middle leader. Her doing so meant that members had to focus on managing their leaders' anxiety rather on serving their clients. Dissemination heightened emotional fallout, as middle leaders joined in rather than absorbed criticism. As Alexa noted, "There can be a lot of finger-pointing here. I think the younger staff, on a morale point of view, [are] very bothered by it and have come to me about it. … It all trickles down." The "trickle down" of diminishment left members more preoccupied with working with and around their leaders' stress and anxiety than with their primary work tasks. This routine thus enabled and perpetuated diminishment rather effective work.

The dissemination routine sharply reduced members' abilities and willingness to assume personal agency in their work. When middle leaders joined in rather than buffered diminishment, group members felt increased pressure. As Kelly noted in relation to Delta meetings in which Jessica was disseminating anxiety, "I feel like we all come out of meeting waiting to be like, 'Okay, who is gonna tell me what I did wrong? What am I gonna get yelled at for?'" When members were preoccupied with wondering about what they did "wrong" and would "get yelled at for," it was difficult for them to authorize themselves to enact their roles as they wished. The space for personal agency was, in effect, preoccupied by fear, anxiety, and stress. As Judy observed about such moments, "I think people are scared to put their neck out on things because based on the time it could be a bad day, or it could be a bad hour. Sometimes, it's better just to fly under the radar." The dissemination routine contributed directly to "bad" days or hours, narrowing the space ("under the radar") for members to take up agency in their work.

The *differentiation* routine, conversely, expanded the space available for personal agency. In the Epsilon group, differentiation reduced stress and anxiety by separating members from direct, unceasing exposure to role and psychological diminishment. Positive reinforcement, trust, and appreciation offset and relieved painful emotional fallout. As Shelley described:

> I have a lot more liberty than I think some other people do. Because I'm part of a new entity in the field, so the expectations around Blaine and I, as we just started this aspect of the firm, I think we're assimilating what we need to. We're also given the ability to breathe.

Blaine's efforts to differentiate Epsilon afforded group members a sense of "liberty"; in moments with minimal role diminishment, they had more "ability to breathe" in their work. In practice, this meant that members could originate and direct their work. Sean pursued his own strategy for building a client base. Shelley developed and implemented tools to help the group's operations. As she described, "I suggested we buy the software. I added it to the website. I wrote the digital copy, and I'm executing the digital plan. I have more freedom than anybody else here to do that." Jean created the idea for an Epsilon database and integrated it within the firm's systems.

The differentiation routine occurred when Blaine, empowered by a distinct client base, was able to distance himself from diminishment dynamics; in so doing, he helped create space for other group members as well. Shelley noted, "Blaine has no problem speaking often. When he speaks more, I feel like I'm empowered to speak more." The differentiated space trickled down; as Jean said, "They [Epsilon leaders] give me a lot of voice, too, to say the things that I do like, the things that I don't like." In this routine, differentiated space meant that group members could, as Shelley noted, "own" their work:

> I'm told by Blaine, "Just do it. I know you can do it well." Therefore, I do. Maybe I don't do it as well always, but there's a sense that I own this. Therefore, it's mine to be proud of and to—no one's going to be reprimanding me for what I do.

Psychological ownership enabled members to focus solely on their work; as Benson observed about the Epsilon group, "They work hard. They're straightforward. They communicate well with each other. There isn't a lot of petty bullshit that goes on, it seems, on their team." The lack of "petty bullshit" seemed both cause and effect of the fact that the Epsilon group was more successful than other AMP groups in attracting and retaining clients.

Organizational growth. Auxiliary routines emphasized members' relationships with their middle leaders rather than with senior leaders or the firm itself. Given the CEO's outsized centrality, the firm as an entity separate from her had little meaning. Groups remained largely separate from one another. The three auxiliary routines pressed middle leaders and group members to focus on needs, purposes, and activities that further minimized the possibility of attending to the welfare of the organization as a

whole. Absorption meant that middle leaders inserted themselves between senior leaders and group members, or tended to those members in the wake of diminishment. Dissemination meant that they pressed group members to satisfy Jane's demands to serve "her" clients. And differentiation involved middle leaders separating themselves and their members from the organization as much as possible; they focused outward, on clients, or inward, on their own tightly knit group, but not on the firm itself. The three routines, in effect, left middle leaders and members unwilling or unable to attend to growth activities driven by integration across groups and centered in the firm itself. Doing so would have involved stepping away from the protections afforded by the auxiliary routines.

It was left to the senior leaders to encourage firmwide integration. They created several interventions to do so. One intervention was a formal brainstorming session that any member was free to invoke, simply by posting a topic and inviting any and all members to join and contribute. Yet, no one actually invoked these sessions. As Hannah observed, the formal sessions "have been around since the beginning [but] I can't remember the last time there was one." A second intervention was the reconfiguration of the office space to encourage collaboration. While groups remained in distinct wings, there were more common areas, including a kitchen, conference room, and public workspaces for members to converge in small working groups. The space was more open, more conducive for face-to-face interaction. Becky reflected, "It's been a nice way to just take a break for an hour or so and just eat and get caught up on other things and read." The reconfigured space, like the brainstorming sessions, did little to instigate collaboration on behalf of strategic growth. Alpha leaders failed to develop and reward interdependence; there was simply no reason for members to halt auxiliary routines.

The third intervention too failed. The strategic plan was for Beta to develop digital products to complement the other groups' "analog" work, train others to add digital services to existing clients, and join new client pitches to add cutting-edge digital work. The strategy floundered in practice. Firm members largely avoided training, believing that digital content was Beta's responsibility. As Rosa noted:

> I think here it's just, like, people … see it as like "This is just some more shit for me to do. What is this team [Beta] doing over here? If I'm going to be digital, why are they digital? What are they going to do to help me?" I think there's a little bit of that "I'm already really busy, and now you want me to take this on, too?"

They were also wary of the new platforms. As Judy observed, "I think people for the most part are hesitant to … volunteer for it and then try it because they're scared. It might not sound right, or it might not be the best thought." Other members had little idea of what it even meant to integrate digital and analog work. As Becky said, "I think sometimes people just don't think of [digital] because they … just don't know how it works, so they don't know how to sell it to a client or talk about it freely. I think there's a lot of opportunities missed because people don't fully understand what digital is."

The lack of willingness, understanding, and belief in digital integration was a direct outcome of the firm's dynamics of diminishment and subsequent auxiliary routines. Rather than develop Beta as a digital business, Alpha focused on promoting Jane's pitches and ideas. As Belle said:

> I feel like they [Jane and Hannah] sell against me sometimes. We'll be in a pitch and they'll say, like, "Well, we'll put digital last because they [client] don't really care about digital." … With them [Jane and Hannah], it's been like pushing a stone uphill.

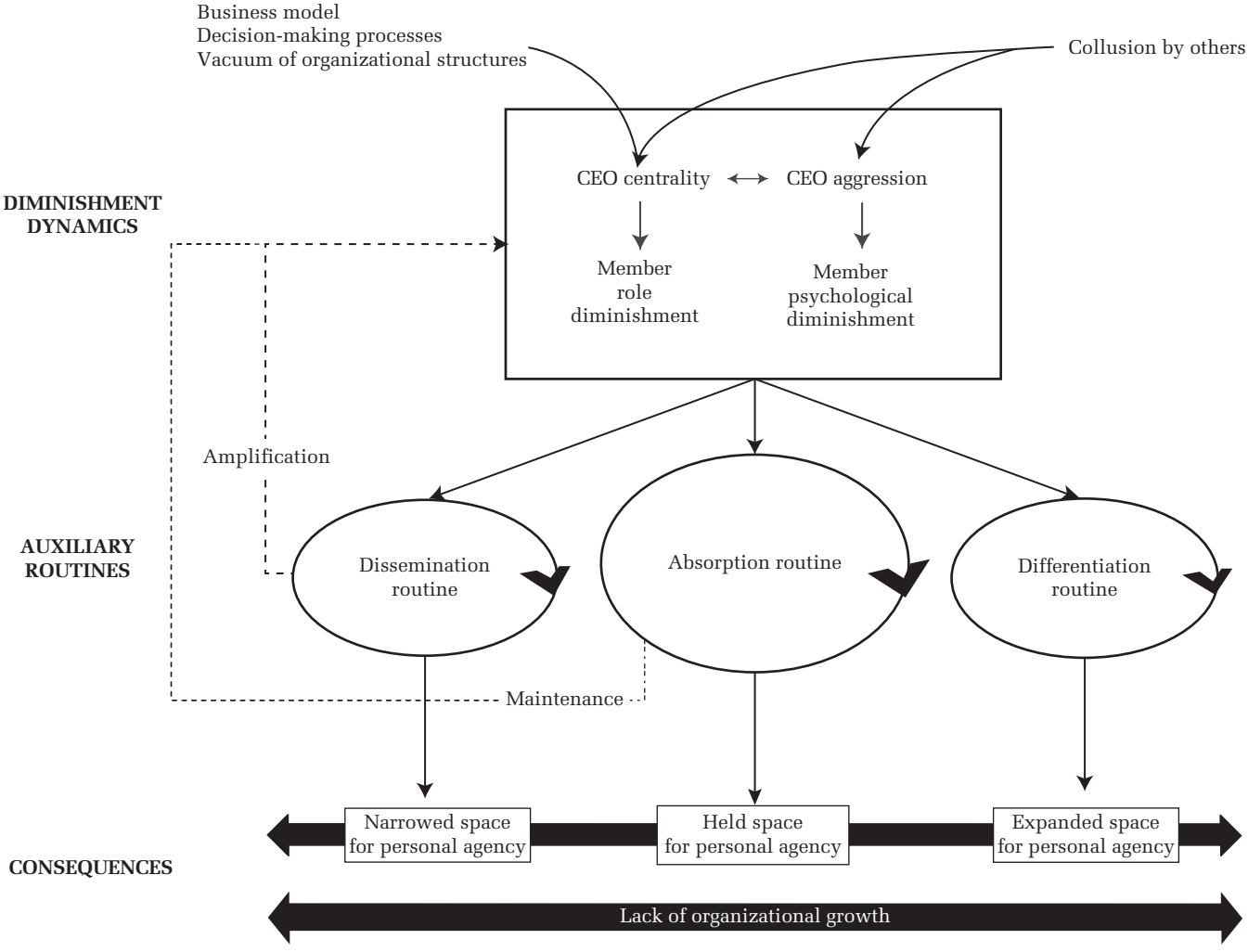
Given such role diminishment, Beta members mostly stopped "pushing … uphill." As Rosa noted, "When it's someone that's supposed to have your back internally and they're like, 'No, you're too crazy. That's too out of left field,' you go, 'Why bother, why try? I know it's not gonna go anywhere.'" Beta members became frustrated with the diminishment of digital innovation, which they experienced as deeply irrational; as Belle noted, "You're selling against yourself because we could be selling these integrated programs that have so much more to them and be able to offer more." Alpha leaders took no responsibility for the lack of digital integration. Hannah observed, "It just hasn't worked. … Belle's mother was ill and passed away, and so her level of engagement understandably has been less." This narrative focused blame squarely on Belle, who turned away from the strategy and toward the absorption routine, protecting Beta members as best she could given Alpha's ambivalence to ideas that did not originate with Jane, who regularly invited members to contribute only to shut them down.

The interventions to enable strategic growth failed as a result of the paradoxical reality of the CEO occupying so much of the center of the firm that there was little space for executive leadership to occur. With Alpha focused on ensuring Jane's centrality,

the firm lacked a wider, authorized leadership team that could direct a growth strategy. Alpha leaders met with middle leaders only for the purposes of reporting on progress and leads. John described these meetings as "no energy, no enthusiasm, no follow through." Belle noted, "I don't really need to be sitting there listening because it doesn't matter to me how Rita's accounts are running or whether Jessica has too much work." Middle leaders were not asked to care about one another's progress or about the firm as a whole; unsurprisingly, they kept their heads down in that meeting, tapping on their laptops, maintaining distance. They focused instead on enacting protective auxiliary routines that enabled their survival and that of their group members.

Unable or unwilling to reflect on how she shaped those circumstances, Jane fumed about the narrowed, protective stances of the middle leaders: "They [middle leaders] have little or no awareness or understanding of the size of some of this other business that's outside of their orbits. They have no interest in helping. They're not capable of helping." Jane often invoked the narrative of others' lack of capability. She noted, "I don't have anyone to send who could sit in a room with the head of [client] and the business head and the head marketing people and sit there at that table and be at that level." This guiding narrative, of Jane at a higher level, shaped much of what occurred (auxiliary routines) and did not occur (organizational growth) in the firm.

FIGURE 2
The Management and Perpetuation of Diminishment through Auxiliary Routines



Summary

Figure 2 summarizes how diminishment was both managed and perpetuated by auxiliary routines. Recurring diminishment was fueled by the CEO's centrality and aggression, the former embedded in structural supports and the latter enabled by collusions. The auxiliary routines that emerged to navigate diminishment and support work, in turn, shaped that diminishment: dissemination amplified and perpetuated diminishment; absorption staved off its effects while maintaining its dominance; differentiation removed members more decisively from exposure to diminishment altogether. These varied effects were shaped by specific types of boundaries. In the absorption routine, the primary routine used by middle leaders, the boundaries between middle and senior leaders were impermeable enough to withstand diminishment; middle leaders were able to intercept, absorb, and tend to emotional fallout. They did so enough to hold the space for others to exert personal agency in their work but not enough to ward off diminishment altogether. Such space could be narrowed without warning amid heightened role or psychological diminishment.

The other two routines were more extreme in relation to boundary permeability. On one end of the continuum, the dissemination routine involved overly permeable boundaries in which middle leaders joined with senior leaders in ways that amplified the diminishment of and sharply narrowed the space for members' personal agency. Middle leaders enacted these routines when they felt the need to protect themselves. On the other end of the continuum, the differentiation routine was predicated on middle leaders maintaining impermeable boundaries, to the point that group members attached to and identified with local rather than senior leaders. In turn, group members were able to expand the authorized space for personal agency, facilitated by a distinct base of power. These three routines enabled people to survive the contradictory needs to avoid and to embrace centrality in the organization. Collectively, the routines also foreclosed their abilities to join together on behalf of the growth of the organization itself.

DISCUSSION

This study offers an extreme case of an organizational context in which members—particularly middle leaders, as those best positioned to navigate authorization for themselves and others—developed coordinated patterns to carve out the space to accomplish tasks while protecting themselves or others amid recurring diminishment. They did so in a context in which members lacked the formal authority to enact their roles as they wished. Rather than create ad hoc workarounds, they developed repetitive processes involving multiple actors. These were *routines*, even if not formally recognized and labeled as such. The routines not only enabled coordination of work but also the regulating of emotional fallout from recurring diminishment. The findings about these auxiliary routines contribute to theory about routines in relation to toxic organizations, and, more generally, to emotional capability in organizations.

Routines in Toxic Organizations

Toxic conditions in organizations exist partly as a function of destructive leaders. The AMP CEO exhibited classic signs of a toxic leader, including demeaning, marginalizing, attacking, blaming, and disenfranchising vulnerable others (Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Padilla et al., 2007; Pelletier, 2010). Yet, there is also an important systemic component to toxic organizations. A systems perspective holds that organizational structures, cultures, strategies, and practices can shift to reflect the neurotic styles of leaders (Kets de Vries, 1991), most particularly in organizations that are centralized and led by powerful CEOs (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). Our study builds on and extends this perspective, pointing to how organizations can systematize not only recurring toxicity but also adaptive responses to that toxicity. The auxiliary routines at AMP emerged as coordinated workarounds, improvisations that evolved into routinized processes by which members dealt with damaging working conditions (see Alter, 2014; Bourdreau & Robey, 2005). These routines became implicitly embedded in organizational practices, as a counterpoint to systemized toxicity, and held implications for how members cope and work amid toxicity.

Strategies for coping with toxic organizational conditions are usually framed as individual-level emotion-focused and problem-focused activities (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). "Emotion-focused coping" involves self-reliance and working harder, submission and ruminating, helplessness and self-blame, and seeking emotional support—activities that offer little relief (Yagil et al., 2011). "Problem-focused coping" involves instrumental actions such as making formal complaints, seeking mediation and whistle blowing, and seeking professional advice—each of

which is of limited efficacy in repressive power structures (Webster et al., 2016). Our study offers an alternative, theorized at the level of the system rather than that of the individual. Auxiliary routines arise as systemic counterpoints that link members together, enabling them to tack back and forth between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to navigate the ebbs and flows of toxicity. The three routines become the fluid means by which organization members gain relief for themselves or others.

These embedded auxiliary routines help members solve the problem of how to accomplish their work while surviving toxic conditions as best they can. Existing literature points to how destructive leadership not only compromises the quality of life for system members but also detracts from the organization's main purposes (Padilla et al., 2007). Destructive leaders can sabotage organizations as well as diminishing members (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). At AMP, with the CEO as saboteur, middle leaders and group members used auxiliary routines to protect not simply themselves but also the firm's interests. This expands previous scholarship that suggests that toxic organizations anchored by powerfully destructive leaders will flounder, their members too powerless to exert personal and collective agency to act effectively on behalf of missions and purposes (Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Pelletier, 2010). Auxiliary routines enable members to exert different moves by which to build, reserve, protect, and exert such agency.

Auxiliary routines thus offer a useful way to theorize how work occurs in contexts marked by destructive power and authority. Feldman (2000: 614) gestured to these contexts when she wrote that organization members "create, resist, engage in conflict, acquiesce to domination" in shaping role performances. Power remains an undertheorized backdrop against which work routines play out (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002). Scholars have noted that work routines represent established "truces" between those giving and those executing orders, creating zones of discretion in how work is accomplished (Becker, 2004; Nelson & Winter, 1982). At AMP, these truces were fragile. The organization lacked well-demarcated, demilitarized zones of discretion that made clear to members their authority in client work, a terrain that was contested daily. The auxiliary routines provided recognizable resolutions to those contests. They enabled members to proceed, at moments, to engage clients with bounded (absorption), sharply narrowed (dissemination), or expanded (differentiation) authority and personal agency.

Our study prompts us to consider other types of auxiliary routines. Our theorizing is limited by the confines of examining one specific organization, with idiosyncratic personality, political, hierarchical, structural, and cultural dynamics. AMP was marked by a particular form of toxicity that generated particular auxiliary routines. We can imagine that, in other organizational contexts with other forms and sources of toxicity (e.g., from peers, partners, customers), auxiliary routines can present differently. For example, the routines might focus less on members negotiating boundaries (in response to the fear, anger, and despair related to diminishment) and more on building alliances that enable them to effectively express dissent (in response to frustration, anger, and hopelessness generated by repression). Future research can address the limitations of this study by charting the range, frequencies, triggers, and implications of other types of auxiliary routines.

Auxiliary Routines as Emotional Capability

Auxiliary routines also contribute to our understanding of emotional capability. Huy (1999: 325) defined emotional capability as an "organization's ability to acknowledge, recognize, monitor, discriminate, and attend to its members' emotions … manifested in organizational norms and routines related to feeling." Emotional capability focuses on the organizational processes, including routines, by which emotions are addressed versus ignored. Such routines include, for example, anxiety-reducing mechanisms such as counseling and support groups that directly address emotional pain (Huy, 1999). Other routines create compassion capability, connecting members in ways that enable them to notice, feel, and respond to suffering (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011). At AMP, routines related to emotional capability were tacit and informal; unlike support groups or counseling sessions, they remained unnamed as daily practices. Middle leaders at AMP were aware, of course, that they had to work within toxic conditions but were likely unaware that they were instigating routines meant to enhance emotional capability. This differs from previous work that indicates that such capability becomes codified as members explicitly modify their roles and organizations create accommodating structures to support, for example, regular displays of compassion (Madden, Duchon, Madden, & Plowman, 2012). Auxiliary routines are covert and fluid, as middle leaders make more or less permeable the

boundaries by which they and others resist, sidestep, conform to, or collude with toxic dynamics (see Alderfer, 1980).

Emotional capability taps the organization's emotional energy, which Huy (1999) described as a poorly understood and underexploited internal capability. He noted as well that the lack of such energy occurs with emotional handicapping—that is, widespread mistrust, alienation, and cynicism in an organization. Our study points to how organizations are arenas in which members can struggle with opposing forces for emotional capability and handicapping. AMP's auxiliary routines were, in effect, regulators of collective emotional experience. The absorption routine involved middle leaders offsetting emotional handicapping by becoming toxic handlers (Frost, 2003): they insulated others from toxins, which they themselves soaked up and endured; and they provided emotional support, by noticing and tending to painful emotional fallout. The absorption routine thus embeds toxic handling into a recurring sequence to enable emotional capability. The dissemination routine, conversely, involves toxic handlers become toxic themselves (see Frost, 2004). Middle leaders transmitted rather than absorbed toxic diminishments and turned away from rather than tended to painful emotional fallout. The dissemination routine was thus an interactional sequence that facilitated emotional handicapping. In the differentiation routine, middle leaders created neutral zones; group members, less available for role and psychological diminishment, were less involved in the interplay between emotional capability and emotional handicapping.

Auxiliary routines emerge as crucial to how people shape, navigate, and survive the ebbs and flows of collective emotional energy in organizations. They helped make members more, or less, emotionally available to engage in their work (see Kahn, 1990), partly by helping them regulate their resources. Conservation of resources theory points to how, particularly within conditions of stress and trauma, the resources available to individuals directly affect their engagements (Hobfoll, 1989), and, further, that individuals constantly strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value, including objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies (Hobfoll, 2001). At AMP, key resources included members feeling valuable to others, the sense of goal accomplishment, feeling support from others, acting as leaders, and feeling independent; each of these was directly impacted by recurring diminishment and, as resources for personal agency, was core to members engaging their work. Auxiliary routines thus regulate ebbs and flows of valued resources. They are, in effect, what Hobfoll (2011: 118) termed "passageways in which resources are supplied, protected, shared, fostered, and pooled." Our study suggests that these passageways can not only hold (absorption) and expand (differentiation) the space for resources to accrue but can also narrow that space as well (dissemination), with direct implications for how members conserve and expend their resources.

Given the limitation of a case study of a relatively small organization, it is unclear whether a larger cohort of middle leaders would have developed variations on these or other auxiliary routines; or, indeed, created other ways to manage collective emotional energy amid recurring diminishment. Further empirical work is needed to explore the relation between auxiliary routines and emotional capability. Such dynamics and structures might occur, for example, in settings where members regularly face emotional exhaustion as a function of their work (Lilius, 2012); work in contexts with long histories of emotional handicapping (Kahn, 2019); struggle with dysfunctional decision-making processes (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004); perform depleting emotional labor (Sutton, 1991); or deal with the enduring effects of unacknowledged organizational disturbance (Kahn, 2011). By studying how multiple actors within various contexts perform repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent action amid varying socioemotional complexities, we can learn more about how such routines facilitate or undermine collective emotional capability and impact members' energies for the work itself.

Practical Implications

Organization members have three primary courses of action when faced with toxic work conditions over which they have little control: they can leave, they can confront offenders, or they can employ defense mechanisms. The two first strategies are risky and require some degree of job mobility. The third strategy is only temporarily tenable, given the psychologically damaging long-term effects of both toxicity and psychological defenses (Kahn, 2019; Lipman-Blumen, 2006). Our findings suggest another possibility: members can act, singly and together, to protect and tend to themselves or others while doing their work and preserving relationships with senior leaders. They do so by developing routines that are, in effect, pathways to develop

whatever personal agency they can in the fixed, toxic conditions governing their work. Our work points to the importance of members becoming intentional about the pathways that they create and vigilant about where those pathways lead. It points as well to the need for members to remain aware that they and others are constantly choosing to claim and cede authority and personal agency; and to remain aware of the costs of those choices to their work and their own psychological and emotional health.

In our study, middle leaders were at the center of auxiliary routines. They made choices, implicitly or explicitly, that balanced multiple potentially competing interests—the need to protect themselves, support others, and advance their work. The management of boundaries was central to these routines and influenced how much personal agency middle leaders and subordinates were afforded. In the absorption routine, middle leaders sought to insulate others from toxicity, absorbing diminishment such that others did not have to do so. They provided emotional support as well, when the diminishment that they could not intercept affected others. The absorption routine points to the role that middle leaders can play in embedding the work of toxic handling within repetitive actions and interactions among organization members (see Frost, 2003, 2004). Toxic handling thus need not simply emerge on an ad hoc basis nor be located in particular individuals acting in isolation.

The dissemination routine acknowledges the reality of middle leaders protecting themselves at the expense of others, sliding up to align with senior leaders and, implicitly, to condone toxicity. The middle leaders in our study who enacted this routine did so partly in order to ingratiate themselves with senior leaders, who were demanding more productivity from the units. These middle leaders became another source of toxicity, which can occur among toxin handlers (Frost, 2003). They transmitted the pressure that they felt to group members, perhaps driven by the unconscious desire to avoid that pressure themselves (Hinshelwood, 2001). Ultimately, such avoidance only perpetuates and reinforces toxic conditions, leaving both middle leaders and group members as casualties. Middle leaders thus need to remain aware of their moves to overly align with senior leaders; such movements, which may seem politically astute, can be costly to them as well as to others. The differentiation routine, conversely, suggests that establishing independent bases of power can license middle leaders to step away from rather than perpetuate toxicity. With less contested terrain, middle leaders and their group members are able to make work rather than struggles over the space for authority and personal agency the center of their relationship with senior leaders.

Finally, while diminishment dynamics in the consulting firm prominently featured the CEO and maintained her as a dominant figure, they were embedded in certain organizational structures and processes and the collusion of others. Leaders across hierarchical levels need to attend closely to how certain individuals are authorized and deauthorized, with particular focus on when those processes facilitate or undermine personal agency and actual work. Management education and organizational consultation can help leaders learn to pay attention in such ways. They then need to make certain choices about how to respond when those with power become increasingly outsized in their presence, at the expense of diminished others. Anchoring those responses in arguments that focus on what structures, processes, and interactions are needed to be successful (which will have some appeal to leaders' self-interests) is likely to be more effective and safer than other forms of dissent (Berg, 2011).

CONCLUSION

We explored the question of whether and how organization members can work with and around toxic conditions over which they have little power. Individuals in these situations have few attractive options. They can hope that powerful leaders will become aware of how they contribute to dysfunction and change their behaviors, or, absent such transformation, leave altogether. They can develop coalitions, alliances, appeals, and other ways to exert influence over those who contribute to dysfunction. They can distance and protect themselves as best they can. They can leave altogether. The possibility that emerges here is that they can develop and follow auxiliary routines to navigate their toxic milieu. These routines are interdependent moves that members make as they play for complicated stakes: to protect themselves or others, to accomplish work, to maintain their status and jobs. We find that individuals are quite sophisticated in their creation of patterns of action and interaction through which to manage, as best they can, the emotional realities with which they are confronted, with well-understood costs and benefits. It was only through serendipity that we identified this sophistication in

our research. We believe that scholars need to become more intentional in their exploration of the routines that individuals develop in order to both perform given work roles and navigate the socioemotional landscapes of their organizations.

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