

## Dr. Rick Cotton



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**Clair, J. A., Ladge, J. & Cotton, R. (2016). This is How We Do it: How Perceived Prosocial Impact Offsets Negative Personal Outcomes Associated with Carrying out Necessary Evils. *Journal of Management Inquiry*. 25(3): 301 – 321.**  
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This exploratory research paper by Dr. Rick Cotton and his co-authors introduces a theoretical model of how perceived prosocial impact offsets negative personal outcomes that result from repeated execution of work tasks involving necessary evils.

Necessary evils are defined as events that require a person to harm others in the service of the greater good. Conversely, prosocial impact is the experience of having helped someone. The theoretical model suggests that the perception of having helped someone in a harrowing situation can provide a buffer from the negative effects of carrying out necessary evils.

In order to identify themes and stressors associated with carrying out downsizing events (one example of a necessary evil task), Cotton and his co-authors interviewed a targeted sample of seasoned human resources (HR) professionals that had been involved in repeated downsizing initiatives, with several in the sample having personally laid off hundreds of employees. In-depth interviews with each HR professional discussed their individual downsizing experiences and the acute and chronic effect of these experiences, along with sharing any lessons learned, best practices and advice for new HR professionals. Seven particular stressors were linked with carrying out tasks categorized as necessary evils.

This study is important as HR professionals and downsizing events have received little attention from management literature to date. It is significant that the prosocial behavior (such as protecting the privacy of those laid off in a downsizing event) displayed by HR professionals carrying out necessary evil work acted as a buffer from the negative effects of this work. Previous research suggested that HR professionals conducting downsizing events coped by withdrawing cognitively, emotionally and physically; however, previous studies focused on professionals who had little experience of conducting downsizing events. In contrast, the HR professionals interviewed by Cotton et al. had experience of a significant number of downsizing events, which may in part account for their ability to cope through prosocial efforts.

Cotton states: "It was great that we were able extrapolate from the HR environment and construct a model that can be applied to a broader set of occupations." The research has wide-ranging implications for managers, organizations and HR professionals and was disseminated to the practitioner audience in August 2016 when *Harvard Business Review* highlighted the study in an online article entitled: "Coping with the effects of emotionally difficult work."

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