

Toxic Leadership, Unit Climate, and Organizational Effectiveness

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Leadership practice can be thought of as sitting on a spectrum with inspiring motivating and exemplary influence at one end and demeaning, destructive and reprehensible behavior at the other. Good leadership is associated with positive organizational outcomes while bad leadership is associated with high stress, low satisfaction, low organizational commitment and low inclination to remain in service.¹ Unfortunately both positive and negative leadership can readily be found in the U.S. military and some destructive leaders rise to positions of significant power and authority. This article examines the phenomenon of toxic leadership and its relationship to unit climate and organizational effectiveness. Despite the importance of leadership in military organizations an emphasis on the positive aspects of leadership alone fails to address instances where those in positions of authority attempt to lead in ways that are inconsistent with underlying values of the organization. After examining the phenomenon of toxic leadership this article suggests some starting points to minimize its negative impact.

Military organizations rightly put a great deal of emphasis on leadership. In the American military, a host of doctrinal publications are dedicated to the subject. Leadership is a focus of the system of professional military education from precommissioning through the joint and senior service colleges, and military journals regularly publish articles on topics associated with the subject. Leadership is viewed almost universally as a positive concept. Good leaders add value to their organizations, and we seek responsible leaders of character from our service academies and precommissioning sources. Culturally speaking, there are primarily two solutions to virtually any problem in military organizations: leadership and training. When confronting a debacle, especially of a public nature, leaders are likely to be replaced, and a training regimen targeted at the transgression is soon to follow. As a case in point, consider reactions to the recent discovery that members of a missile wing responsible for nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles were cheating on proficiency tests. Leaders, some of whom did not cheat or suborn those who did, were fired, and additional training was implemented.² Despite the reliance on leadership as a mainstay of military organizations, the aspirational notions of leadership espoused in doctrine may be different from what is actually experienced in practice. Some people in positions of authority engage in behavior that has a decidedly detrimental effect on subordinates.

In her book *Bad Leadership*, Harvard professor Barbara Kellerman suggests that studying leadership without considering the possibility of bad leadership is analogous to studying medicine without considering disease.³ When researchers conducted focus groups at the US Army War College designed to obtain insights into the nature of destructive leadership, they were regaled with disheartening stories of ill treatment at the hands of supervisors—treatment inconsistent with military values.⁴ When the results of that study were published in the journal *Military Review*, the author received hundreds of e-mails from people who wanted to relate stories of what they perceived as abuse at the hands of their leaders, a phenomenon that continues to this day.⁵ Our fascination with leadership and its potential—what James Meindl, Sanford Ehrlich, and Janet Dukerich describe as “the romance of leadership”—should not blind us from examining the negative impact of influence behaviors that are sometimes manifested by those who attempt to lead but do so poorly.⁶

When exploring toxic leadership, we should note that individuals who research and publish on the concept use different labels and key words. Abusive supervision, destructive leadership,

bullying, incivility, brutal bosses, petty tyranny, and toxic leadership are related topics. Since no definitional consensus in the literature exists, people interested in learning more should look beyond a single term. To some scholars such as Jean Lipman-Blumen, toxic leadership is simply very bad leadership.⁷ Toxic leadership is evidenced by its negative effect on the organization, and the source can be anything from incompetence or inattentiveness to malevolence. Others seek a more discerning definition. In 2004 this author proffered a three-part definition of toxic leadership:

1. An apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates.
2. A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate.
3. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest.⁸

The first two elements of the above definition are prerequisite, and the third is an intervening variable. In other words, if a supervisor is perceived as unconcerned about the well-being of subordinates and has a leadership style that depresses organizational climate, a toxic leadership problem exists. On the one hand, a perception by subordinates that the boss is getting ahead at their expense makes the negative impact even worse. If, on the other hand, subordinates perceive that the interpersonally challenged supervisor is motivated by the best interests of the organization and is not trying to get ahead at their expense, the situation is less problematic. Subordinates might be forgiving of a rough-handling leadership style if they think that the motives are to serve a higher purpose.

The US Army recently published a descriptive definition of toxic leadership in Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, marking the first time that the concept has received attention as institutional knowledge in a military organization:

Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. This leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves. The negative leader completes short-term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfill requests. This may achieve results in the short term, but ignores the other leader competency categories of *leads* and *develops*. Prolonged use of negative leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale.⁹ (emphasis in original)¹⁰

Regardless of how toxic leadership is defined, its impact is negative. Numerous studies have suggested that military personnel who work for toxic leaders express lower levels of satisfaction with their jobs, level of pay and allowances, supervisors, peers, and even their subordinates.¹¹ Junior and midgrade officers who experience toxic leadership are less inclined to remain in service.¹² A study of 373 Air National Guard members and their supervisors indicated a relationship between abusive supervision and a decrease in organizational citizenship behavior.¹³ When working for a toxic leader, subordinates will typically comply to avoid the wrath of the supervisor, but they are not inclined to go the extra mile—behavior equated with organizational citizenship. Compliance may be preferable to noncompliance, but it is not a substitute for commitment that leads to prudent risk taking, creativity, and innovation. A 2013 study of 2,572 Army personnel in Iraq linked abusive supervision to a decline in followers' moral courage and a decrease in identification with the organization's core values.¹⁴ A recent dissertation that focused on cadets at the US Air Force Academy suggested a relationship between toxic leadership and increased levels of

cynicism.¹⁵ Cynicism equates to a negative attitude accompanied by feelings of hopelessness, disillusionment, and even contempt of individuals or an entire organization. A recent National Public Radio broadcast asserted the possibility of a link between toxic leadership and suicide.¹⁶ We might hypothesize that alcohol consumption and incidents of domestic violence would be higher among those who work for toxic bosses. Research on toxic leadership in the military is just beginning, but studies in nonmilitary contexts point to additional negative effects.

A 2009 study of incivility in the workplace polled several thousand managers and employees from a broad range of US companies. Those on the receiving end of toxic exchanges expressed anger, frustration, and sometimes revenge. The study indicated that 48 percent decreased their work effort, 47 percent decreased their time at work, 38 percent decreased their work quality, 66 percent said their performance declined, 80 percent lost time worrying about the incident, 63 percent lost time avoiding the offender, and 78 percent said their commitment to the organization declined.¹⁷ Those numbers reflect a significant loss of productivity that merits the attention of executives, and if they are applicable to military populations, they ought to get the attention of leaders at all levels. A recent Gallup study found that managers account for 70 percent of variance in employee engagement scores. It further asserted that only 13 percent of employees are engaged worldwide.¹⁸ Actively disengaged employees cost the United States between \$450 billion to \$550 billion each year in lost productivity.¹⁹ The jury is in. Toxic leadership is bad, so why isn't more attention devoted to the phenomenon?

The fact that the identification and removal of toxic leaders are not a higher priority relates in part to the top-down nature of military organizations. Performance evaluations and fitness reports are typically based on the observations of supervisors alone and exclude perceptions of subordinates. Since toxic leaders tend to be very responsive and even obsequious to their superiors, they don't look so bad from the top down. They are often seen as responsive and able to obtain high levels of performance from their subordinates. A characteristic refrain would be, "I know Joe is a bit rough, but when he says jump, his team jumps. He sure gets results." Toxic leaders are often very dedicated to the organization and may have the best of intentions. Unfortunately, they manifest an inappropriate interpersonal style that produces harm in the long run. Measures of effectiveness are typically short-term in nature, focusing on the most recent mission accomplished while the long-term health and welfare of those who comprise the unit are overlooked. Some scholars suggest that toxic leaders are cunning operators who skillfully manage sources of power. They ingratiate themselves to powerful people and carefully manage their reputations with superiors, all the while making life miserable for the people who must work for them.²⁰

Support from senior leaders is necessary if toxic leadership is to be addressed at the enterprise level. Personnel policies, including the means by which we identify and select individuals for key positions, might be an important leverage point for dealing with the problem. Those at the top of the organizational pyramid sometimes do not see that the difficulty is as acute as it once was. They will recall toxic experiences from the past but frequently consider them a right of passage that they successfully navigated. We frequently hear the refrain, "Abusive supervision was a real problem years ago, but it is much better now." Their perceptions are likely influenced by their position. A friend once compared the situation to the "monkeys in the trees syndrome." He explained that in the rain forest, fruit ripens more quickly in the top branches of the trees. Primates of high status tend to congregate in the upper branches where the fruit is sweeter and more plentiful. Lesser-status primates are relegated to the lower branches. When the high-status monkeys look down, they see bright and smiling monkey faces beaming back at them. When the lower-status monkeys look up, they have a much different and less attractive view. What we see depends upon where we sit. An annual survey conducted by the Center for Army Leadership assessed the quality of leadership through questionnaires completed by over 16,800 uniformed personnel and 2,900 members of the civilian workforce. That large-scale representative survey

found that subordinates perceived 16 percent of Army leaders as ineffective. Those leaders received high marks for getting results (a 78 percent effectiveness rating) but lower levels of effectiveness in creating a positive environment (70 percent) and developing others (59 percent).²¹ Regardless of whether or not the quality of leadership is better now than in the past, more work clearly remains to be done.

Military culture can also be an impediment. Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines are socialized to respect the rank if not the individual. It is a culture that prizes loyalty, so those who complain about the boss are not likely to be favorably received at higher levels in the chain of command. A toxic leader who hears of an emerging complaint can often paint subordinates in an unfavorable light long before the complainant can take advantage of an open-door policy. Consequently, what is a person who is suffering under a toxic leader to do?

The safest courses of action for the unfortunate individual who ends up harnessed to a toxic boss are to build a personal support system to help cope with the situation and find an exit through reassignment, temporary duty, or even termination of service when possible. Oftentimes, military organizations with high turnover offer light at the end of the tunnel due to an impending move by either the toxic leader or the targeted service members themselves. Unfortunately, some bad advice in the popular literature advocates treating toxic leaders as if they were bullies on the playground. That may be good counsel in a corporate setting where walking off the job is an alternative, but military personnel are held to terms of enlistment. Although frank and honest conversations are rarely a bad idea, a follower should expect a negative reaction when directly confronting a toxic leader. In the stratified and regimented structure of the military, the significant power differential does not work to the advantage of the suffering subordinate. If a supervisor is truly toxic, he or she will likely take measures to destroy a complainant's reputation—or worse. The targets of a toxic leader would be well advised to keep detailed notes of uncivil exchanges and inappropriate behavior, including dates, times, and witnesses. It may feel unseemly to “keep book” on a superior, but if it comes to the point where an official complaint is warranted despite the risks associated with antagonizing the boss, those details will help substantiate an investigation by the inspector general or other investigating official. One should take care when enlisting the support of others. Allegations with multiple complainants tend to be taken more seriously, but mutiny is still a punishable offense. In some circumstances, an organization is best served when a courageous individual throws self-interest to the wind and seeks every available avenue for redress of an untenable situation. Evidence indicates that complaints of toxic leadership are being taken more seriously. Some individuals, including high-ranking officers, are being removed from command positions because of the organizational climate they created.

In 2010 the commanding officer of a guided missile cruiser was removed after an inspector general report concluded that she created an atmosphere of fear and hostility through humiliating and belittling subordinates.²² An Air Force major general retired after an inquiry concluded that he was “cruel and oppressive” and mistreated subordinates. He was characterized as a profane screamer who went through six executive officers and aides-de-camp in a year.²³ Gen Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has expressed support for 360-degree reviews that consider feedback from superiors, peers, and subordinates as a way of identifying toxic leaders. An *Air Force Times* article questioned whether such reviews would ever be a part of formal evaluations and provided insights into how each of the services is considering implementation:

- The Army is using the reviews aggressively, with senior officers as well as junior officers and senior noncommissioned officers undergoing the “multisource assessment and feedback” over the past few years.
- The Navy is ahead of the other services, having experimented with these assessments for about a decade. All admirals get them as part of their training, and prospective commanders and

executive officers complete the reviews at Command Leadership School. In addition, surface warfare ensigns and department heads get similar evaluations during Surface Warfare Officers School.

- The Air Force had little prior experience with 360-degree reviews, but during the past six months has developed a prototype review and encouraged some generals to begin taking them.
- At press time, Marine Corps officials had not responded to a request for comment.²⁴

Toxic leaders are largely immune from influence from the bottom up. They tend to rationalize their behavior, dismiss complaints from below, and avoid unit climate surveys or ignore the results.²⁵ Although they might be the ones who need coaching and feedback the most, they are also the least likely to be receptive when those resources are made available. The good news is that they are often reachable from the top down.²⁶ Because they are responsive to superiors and concerned about career progression, a clear and focused conversation from the boss can help modify problematic behavior. Personalities rarely change, but behavior can be modified. Those in positions of responsibility must therefore be alert to toxic tendencies in their subordinates and prepare to engage in some hard discussions. They should use small words and be direct. Rather than saying, “You do a great job, and I am impressed with all you accomplish; however, you need to work on your interpersonal skills,” they should say, “Your team hates working for you; you are perceived as petty, abusive and self-promoting.” They should be specific about observed or reported behavior that is inconsistent with the underlying values of the organization and demand change while offering support. Such conversations are not comfortable, and there is something human about seeking to avoid confrontation, especially with someone who is otherwise accomplishing the mission. We invest a great deal of time and effort in preparing leaders, and a great deal is demanded of them. They deserve a crack at development, but if their interpersonal behavior does not improve, then those leaders should be removed from positions where they can harm others. Such difficult personnel decisions should not be perceived as a failure of leadership but as its necessary practice. There is a time when developmental efforts should end and reliefs for cause and reassignments or firings should begin. We must remember that people who work for a toxic leader hold not only the individual accountable but also tend to consider the entire chain of command culpable for tolerating the behavior. “My supervisor is terrible” often translates to “the Air Force is terrible.”

Working for a toxic supervisor can have a silver lining. If the subordinate survives, it can be a character-building and developmental experience. That is probably of little solace to those currently working for a toxic leader, but it may well be that we learn as much or more from bad leaders as we do from good ones. At the very least, one can amass a long list of “things I will never do when I am in charge.” Such experiences also contribute to the development of a form of interpersonal calluses. People who have worked for a toxic leader are unlikely to be thrown off by a boss who has a bad day once in a while. Amassing some skill in dealing with prickly supervisors and problematic colleagues can be quite beneficial. A wise supervisor once offered the following very good advice to this author: “Out there somewhere is a jerk with your name on him. How you navigate that situation will determine whether you will have a long or short career.”

President Dwight David Eisenhower, who also served as the supreme allied commander in Europe during World War II, quipped, “You don’t lead people by hitting them over the head—that’s assault, not leadership.”²⁷ We should acknowledge that it is important not only to accomplish the mission but also to lead in a way that engenders the respect and commitment of followers. In 1879 Maj Gen John Schofield wisely observed that

it is possible to impart instructions and to give commands in such a manner and in such a tone of voice as to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself; while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.²⁸

Schofield knew what we keep rediscovering. It is not just what we tell people to do that matters. How we tell them is also of paramount importance. The manner of telling is a reflection of leadership style.

It would be a mistake to suggest that calls to eliminate toxic leadership are some form of politically correct pandering to subordinates—a “let’s all just be nice and sing ‘Kumbaya’ ” kind of approach. The right leadership approach meets the needs of subordinates and the demands of a given situation, which can vary significantly. Behavior that is appropriate and even appreciated in one situation can be highly inappropriate and destructive in another. It is similar to humor: something considered funny in the locker room might seem boorish or offensive in another setting. That observation places a premium on self-awareness and self-regulation as important abilities for leaders. There is a time to be loud, and nothing is quite as effective as a well-acted fit of anger by the boss. Leaders sometimes have to tell people to do difficult, dangerous things and have to address substandard performance; they cannot afford the luxury of pleasing all people all of the time. Attempting to satisfy everyone and needing to be liked are antithetical to good leadership. In the words of Robert Sutton, author of *The No Asshole Rule*, someone in a leadership position will at times be thought of as an asshole.²⁹ Good leaders, however, do not make that mode their default setting. Just because a supervisor has a bad day and barks at a subordinate does not necessarily mean that he or she is toxic. The pattern of behavior over time as perceived by subordinates and the cumulative impact on organizational climate and effectiveness tell the tale.

We see examples of big-personality leaders who, admittedly, are very effective but also interpersonally problematic. It is hard to argue with the winning record of former basketball coach Bob Knight, nicknamed “the General.” He won many championships and amassed an enviable winning record despite chair-throwing tantrums and publicly berating his players. Others bring up examples of famous military generals like Patton or MacArthur, who display a penchant for an identifiable leadership archetype—the self-assured, no-nonsense, autocratic, authoritarian, take-no-prisoners leader who pays little heed to the opinions of others but is extremely effective. A mythology seems associated with such forms of leadership. From the popular media, we can identify the socially maladaptive and narcissistic Dr. Gregory House as played by actor Hugh Laurie in the television series *House, M.D.* What is it about that character that we appreciate? House is antisocial, and his private life is a train wreck. Yet he is brilliant and unmatched as a diagnostician. There is something attractive about people who are liberated from social convention and manage to get the tough jobs done against all odds. The problem with such examples, engaging as they might be, is that for every effective leader who acts like a megalomaniac or narcissist, it is possible to identify another who is just as effective yet humble and socially adept. For every Patton and MacArthur we can find a Bradley or an Eisenhower. For every Coach Knight there is a Coach Mike Krzyzewski, who, by the way, earned more career wins than Knight. In all fairness, it might not be accurate to characterize Patton or MacArthur as toxic since many who worked for them appreciated their talents. They are often caricatured, however, as having some dark aspects to their personalities. Recall that Patton was sidelined for slapping a hospitalized Soldier and chastised on more than one occasion for making imprudent public statements. Pre-

sident Truman fired the flamboyant MacArthur from his position as commander of US Forces in Korea when it appeared that he favored a policy that the president opposed—an expansion of the Korean conflict. We are left to wonder how much more effective these men could have been if they had modified some of their more problematic behavior.

Now that we have made the case that toxic leadership is a problem worthy of intervention at all levels, we should acknowledge that it may not be reasonable to expect that it will be eliminated altogether. Simply firing toxic leaders as they are discovered, even if it were feasible, is not likely. Statistically speaking, in terms of effective performance, a bottom one-third will always exist. Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway suggest that toxic leaders flourish in toxic cultures.³⁰ That seems like a harsh indictment that belies the notion of a few bad apples, but it is worthy of some consideration. If they are correct, military organizations could be very busy identifying and removing toxic leaders without addressing the underlying causes of toxic behavior. It is appropriate to ask whether we create toxic leaders, unintentionally reward or encourage them, and tolerate them in our midst. Those questions deserve additional examination. In the meantime, we can continue to determine the scope of the problem by asking the right questions. Toxic leadership can be measured, as can organizational climate. Subordinates' lack of experience and insight into the duties of their superiors may prevent them from fully evaluating them. They can, however, relate whether they are abused, humiliated, and denigrated at the hands of their supervisors. They can indicate whether they have trust and confidence in their leadership and whether they feel that their leaders are operating in concert with the espoused values of the organization. Rather than seeking the complete elimination of toxic leaders, perhaps it is more reasonable to expect that they be identified and addressed more expeditiously. That approach would involve the implementation of means to rapidly identify toxic leaders and then intervene to militate against their negative impact. One thing is certain: if we do not look for destructive leaders, we are not likely to find them until they have wreaked havoc on their units.

Military organizations would be well served by narrowing the band of tolerance for leadership style to reflect the needs of a twenty-first-century all-recruited and -professionalized force. Military life is inherently demanding and stressful. It is not advisable to make it any more difficult that it needs to be by inflicting backbiting, belittling bosses from hell on service members. Military leadership is a highly accountable profession. Those who are placed in positions of great responsibility are rightly held to a high standard of performance. That is wholly appropriate when such people are entrusted with the nation's most precious resource—our sons and daughters.

Notes

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of toxic leadership in the military and suggests a number of detrimental effects that warrant an organizational response. It asserts that positive and aspirational notions of leadership serve to hide the fact that followers do not always experience leadership favorably. Some behavior of those in authoritative positions is perceived by subordinates as a detriment to mission accomplishment. The article reviews contemporary research on the topic and suggests potential solutions.



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