

## **Toxic Leadership in the Workplace**

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## **Executive Summary**

What defines a toxic leader? There are several traits and attributes that contribute to a leader's toxicity within an organization. The ability for an organization to recognize this behavior and mindfully handle the situation is crucial to the survival of the conglomerate. There are several contributors to a toxic environment - most of which deriving from poor leadership and training. If an organization implements these improvements, it could assist with the effects of toxicity. The negative effects of this toxicity can result in lost profits, decreased morale within the organization, and even lawsuits against the business.

## **Toxic Leadership in the Workplace**

### **Introduction**

One of the most crucial concepts to have present in the workplace is effective leadership. Most people, despite their differences in background and daily life, recognize the prevalence of an effective leader in the workplace. That being said, what is the effect of toxicity in the workplace? Toxic leaders are identified by a multitude of attributes, the effect of these characteristics detrimental to the organization in which they are a part of. Consequently, it is crucial for the workplace to be equipped with methods of handling toxicity and cultivate an environment that is accepting to its members.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Narcissism and Toxic Leaders**

The authors - Lieutenant Colonel Joe Doty, Ph.D., U.S. Army, Retired, and Master Sergeant Jeff Fenlason, U.S. Army - issued a report outlining narcissism and its ability to turn toxic within an organization. The two questions posed in this article are “How aware are leaders of their narcissistic behaviors?” and “How does someone recognize his own narcissism and its toxic outcomes?” These questions are answered through practical explanation and solutions to toxic narcissism are provided.

The article recognizes that narcissism itself isn't always detrimental to an organization - only certain qualities make it so. These qualities are being a poor listener, being overly sensitive to criticism, taking advantage of others to achieve one's own goals, lacking empathy or disregarding the feelings of others, having excessive feelings of self-importance, exaggerating achievements or talents, needing constant attention and admiration, reacting to criticism with rage, shame, or humiliation, and being preoccupied with success or power. (Doty & Fenlason, 2013) In light of these detrimental qualities, the Army released a study reporting that eighty percent of the officers and NCOs polled had observed toxic leaders in action and that twenty percent had worked for a toxic leader. These results prove how toxic leaders affect a large range of people in an organization. The solutions and methods proposed to deal with a toxic leader are possessing emotional intelligence and Army leaders focusing on being the best they can possibly be.

### **Verbal Abuse and Intent to Leave**

The authors - Laura Sofield and Susan Salmond - describe the experience of verbal abuse in a large multi-hospital system and determine the relationship of verbal abuse with intent to leave the organization. Through a study, it was found that amount of abuse and intent to leave were significantly related. The report states that organizations must adopt zero-tolerance policies for professional verbal abuse; in addition, education and coaching are needed to help nurses to improve their skills when responding to patient-to-nurse and professional-to-professional verbal abuse.

Verbal abuse significantly affects the workplace by decreasing morale, increasing job dissatisfaction, and creating a hostile work environment. These impacts on a work environment can lead to high employee turnover within the organization. Often times, this happens in hospitals with nurses. Nurses are often abused verbally by superiors and their patients, which can lead to lack of motivation among nursing staff.

### **Sociopaths in High Places**

The authors, Joseph Cangemi and William (Bill) Pfohl Psy.D., utilize seven cases to describe the behavior of the sociopathic personality in a leadership role. The sectors where this article guides its focus include the industrial, the academic, and the non-profit organization sectors. Through in-depth analysis of several of the cases presented, the reader should be provided with a better awareness of the sociopathic mind and its propensity for destruction of others, as well as the major focus of this behavior disorder – the need to win, and to win at all costs. The article includes suggestions for dealing with such individuals to further assist the reader in becoming more aware of their methods, behavior, and self-centered focus, as well as how to deal with them. (Cangemi & Pfohl, 2009)

The article writes,

“Sociopaths will take advantage of others whenever they can, whenever they sense individuals involved with them show great respect for them, are naive – or fear them. Once their hand is played, to the more observant individual it is obvious one is dealing with a destructive, self- centered, uncaring, remorseless

person bent on gaining full advantage of the situation. The recipient must expose the conscience-less predator for what he/she is – face-to-face. No excuses. The sociopath must be exposed and must know the individual is aware of what is going on and is not afraid. Usually, the sociopath will use denial, develop some intelligent excuse, then back down and act as though the entire affair is insignificant and find someone else to go after. However, one must not be deceived; the predator may appear to go away but will be looking, lurking, sometimes quietly, for another opportunity to damage the individual who has confronted him/her. A sociopath's ego cannot take losing to a person he/she despises, envies, is jealous of, or whom she/he wants "to bury" personally and professionally." (Cangemi & Pfohl, 2009)

The message that this quote attempts to send to readers is that they must constantly be aware of the sociopaths malicious attitude and be equipped to protect themselves and the organization. Some ways for an individual to better understand the situation is by researching the traits of sociopaths, standing their ground and confronting the sociopath, and always maintaining healthy skepticism in relationships with others.

### **High Toxicity Leadership**

This article, written by Alan Goldman, goes into depth on a specific HR case involving a man with borderline personality disorder. In this, Goldman explains the detrimental effects that borderline personality disorder can have on an organization. It

dives into the day-to-day effects of a highly toxic leader and the clear impacts it can have on an organization.

The individual from the case in this article had severe borderline personality disorder which was left undiagnosed. The employee was having extremely negative effects on the workplace - causing the other employees' unhappiness and leading to numerous lost clients and profits. As a way of understanding the issue at hand, the company called in an outside third party to evaluate the problem - a psychotherapist. This psychotherapist worked through a lot of issues with the individual, and ended up giving the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder.

One of the major details uncovered was that the individual had "a longstanding pattern of undermining his achievements just when he was about to reach his goal." (Goldman, 2006) This would involve self-sabotaging just as he was about to achieve any preset goals.

Upon diagnosing the individual, it became apparent that in addition to his pre-existing condition, the individual also had environmental factors contributing to their unpredictability. Eventually, the individual felt comfortable in apologizing publicly to the people he had affected and made steps to improve his standing in the organization.

The article suggests that in severe cases of toxic leadership, an intervention by an outside third party may be necessary for recovery. It also reminds the reader that toxicity left undetected escalates and permeates organizations. In addition, high toxicity leadership presents a complex challenge for management to incorporate psychological and psychiatric expertise into an organization's repertoire.

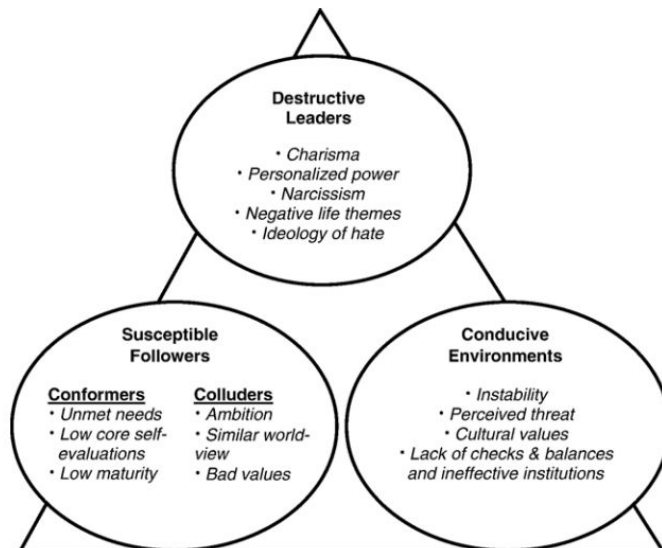


## **The Toxic Triangle**

This article - written by Art Padilla, Robert Hogan, and Robert B. Kaiser - speaks of how destructive leadership entails the negative consequences that result from a confluence of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. It reviews how destructive leadership has been discussed in certain literature and note that it has never been clearly defined. Based upon their own prior research, the authors develop a definition of destructive leadership that emphasizes negative outcomes for organizations and individuals linked with and affected by them. From there, the toxic triangle is outlined. This would be made up of the characteristics of leaders, followers, and environmental contexts connected with destructive leadership. The framework is demonstrated with use of Fidel Castro's dictatorship of Cuba as a clear example.

The article begins by attempted to determine a definition for destructive leadership, which is ultimately defined as such; "Our view of destructive leadership distinguishes between occupying a leadership role and being effective in that role. We view leadership as a functional resource for group performance; it involves influencing individuals to forego, for a limited time, their selfish, short-term interests and contribute to long-term group goals within an environmental or situational context. All significant human achievement requires leadership to unite people, channel their efforts, and encourage their contribution toward the goals of the collective enterprise. Thus, leadership effectiveness concerns how well a group is able to accomplish its purpose." (Padilla & Hogan & Kaiser, 1997)

From establishing a definition of destructive leadership, the article focuses on what is called “The toxic triangle”, which is pictured below.



Toxic leadership is a function of elements in three different domains; leaders, followers, and environments. All three domains may not always be present in a toxic organization, but functions in the elements within them contribute to the toxicity.

### Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Army

This report, written by Colonel Denise F. Williams, explores the extent to which toxic leadership exists in the U.S. Army. This report sought a definition of toxic leadership, consolidated expert views on the personal characteristics of toxic leaders, and compiled a taxonomy of eighteen types of toxic leaders. The project was created to be a review of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army. It derives insights into toxic leadership

in the Army; why it exists, why it is tolerated and what impact positive leadership may have on this phenomenon.

Some of the defined traits of toxic leaders identified in this report are incompetence, malfunctioning, maladjusted, sense of inadequacy, malcontent, irresponsible, amoral, cowardice, insatiable ambition, egotism, arrogance, selfish values, avarice and greed, lack of integrity, deception, malevolent, malicious, and malfeasance. (Williams, 2005) A combination of these traits leads to a worst case scenario in leaders.

There are several types of leaders identified in this report; the absentee leader, the incompetent leader, the codependent leader, the passive-aggressive leader, the busybody leader, the paranoid leader, the rigid leader, the controller leader, the compulsive leader, the intemperate leader, the enforcer leader, the narcissistic leader, the callous leader, the street fighter leader, the corrupt leader, the insular leader, the bully leader, and the evil leader. (Williams, 2005) Each type of leader contains traits and characteristics that are toxic, but one toxic individual can often be identified as multiple toxic leaders.

In addition, this report discusses that toxic leadership is very common in the U.S. Army. "Recall that Maslow points out the needs at the lowest levels must be met before advancing to the next level. Unfortunately, some humans struggle with getting these needs met. They get delayed at a certain level of development and are never able to move on. If this is at level two, the level of safety, or level three, love and belonging, the result may be low or no self-esteem. Nearly every type of toxic leadership previously

defined has self esteem concerns as its root. Some of these people make it into the Army and into leadership positions. Another reason may be the inherent paradoxical nature of military leadership. A review of some of the toxic leadership types reflect some desired qualities of military leadership. Unlike some of the milder traits and types, such as incompetence, malfunctioning, inadequacy, and absentee, many of the more severe traits and types, such as busy, rigid, in control, enforcing, confident, and street fighter, may be characteristics the Army values in a leader. It is the extent to which these characteristics are applied that represents a problem.” (Williams, 2005) The combination of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and the environment that the Army promotes can easily lead to toxic leadership within the organization.

The report suggests that the best method of dealing with toxic leadership within the U.S. Army is good leadership itself. A crucial way to teach others great leadership tendencies is by showing them what a good leader looks like.

### **Proposed Solution**

While, unfortunately, there is no clear-cut solution to toxic leadership in the workplace there are, however, steps that can be taken to ensure the atmosphere/environment remains as close to healthy as possible and that, when detected, such leaders can be addressed.

These steps begin by encouraging increased, improved, and effective communication channels. This effective communication begins with establishing an

open communication policy with employees within the organization. When employees have the ability to provide feedback, they feel as though their voices are heard by upper level management. From there, it is management's duty to consider and encourage feedback within the organization. Cultivating a respectful and genuine environment is important to work productivity. The leadership must be receptive to change and suggestions and the organization must remain transparent in order to be high-functioning. Finally, a system of checks and balances must be put into place to ensure that if negative actions are being taken by individuals in an organization, someone will be there to correct the behavior. The best interests of the organization must be taken into consideration in handling all workers - including leadership. If a toxic leader is found in an organization, they should be spoken to, warned, retrained, relocated, or even expelled, as a last resort, if determined necessary.

While, as was aforementioned, there is no clear cut solution to dealing with toxic leadership, there are several actions that management can put into place that could assist in protecting the organization in the case of discovering a toxic leader. One of these actions could be more training sessions for management on cultivating an open and accepting environment. More training can help leadership understand the importance of listening and being receptive to change within an organization. In addition, members of the organization can be made aware of characteristics of toxic leaders so that they can recognize them in leadership. Making employees aware of these toxic characteristics can help them feel comfortable coming forward after

outbursts and improve their ability to recognize when behavior by others is not acceptable.

### **Conclusion**

Toxic leaders are detrimental to the organizations in which they belong to. With their negative attributes and inferior leadership, they tend to hold back the growth of the organization and individuals around them. With proper preparation, workplaces can equip their workers to recognize the toxic traits and be able to act on them through reporting, healthy confrontation, and mediation.

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