



White Paper: Strength Through Education Solutions Combating Toxic Leadership Through Education and Empowerment

*Diane Mitchell, Strength Through Education, Inc.
March 2021*

"The most important thing I learned is that soldiers watch what their leaders do. You can give them classes and lecture them forever, but it is your personal example they will follow."
– General Colin Powell

Statement of the Problem

Less than 1% of the population of the United States volunteers for service, yet the US military retains its top spot as the undisputed military power in the world (Norman 2020). This would not be possible without excellent leadership. Like all inclusive, diverse, world-class organizations, the military is plagued by a small number of counterproductive (toxic) leaders who create a disproportionately negative effect on the institution. "Enough hard-driving, high-achieving, compassionate leaders who understand the importance of good climate exist in the Armed Forces to belie the myth that rule by fear and intimidation is necessary" (Reed 2004). Counterproductive leadership contributes to many problems facing the US military today, including:

- | | |
|--|---|
| -lower morale and negative impact on the mission | -poor perception of the military organization |
| -the devastation of esprit de corps, discipline, drive and willing service of subordinates | -lack of desire to re-enlist |
| -a negative effect on marriage and homelife | -loss of trust in leadership and the organization |
| -high workplace stress and a loss of individual self-confidence | -suicidal ideation |
| -job dissatisfaction | -suicide |
| | -other mental health problems |

In addition, the CDC has established that toxic leadership behaviors can occur along the continuum of harm which perpetuates sexual harassment and sexual assault (Dills 2016).

Service members may lack education and guidance regarding the resources available and steps to take for reporting counterproductive leadership, handling administrative concerns that may result from toxicity, and mitigating negative impacts on mission and career success. More reporting of toxic behaviors will reduce the negative effects of toxic leadership, help prevent sexual harassment and assault, contribute to mission readiness, and strengthen the military institution itself.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to introduce Strength Through Education, Inc, a pro-military non-profit corporation organized to provide resources and coaching that support and empower United States Service Members. STE works within the existing military structure and uses evidence-based, data-driven methods to provide education, information and career coaching. STE empowers individual service members in need with tools to address toxic leadership and to strengthen their military careers. Strength Through Education is also an excellent tool for senior officers. We provide accessible information, easily communicated, regarding proper rules and procedures that are expected of junior

officers and senior enlisted. Our organization can help a great leader keep toxic leadership behaviors out of their unit. Strength Through Education's ultimate goal is to keep our armed forces strong and mission-focused.

Summary of the Relevant Literature

The "Toxic Triangle" model (Padilla 2007) outlines the three components needed for a toxic leader to thrive: the Destructive Leader, the Conducive Environment and the Susceptible Followers. Within this framework, the majority of military research and organizational initiatives from 2003 to the present have focused on just two of the three components: the Destructive Leader and the Conducive Environment.

The third branch of the triangle, the Susceptible Followers (enlisted service members and any subordinates within a chain of command) has received considerably less attention. Research related to followers has found:

- suicidal behavior can be triggered by toxic command (Matsuda 2010)
- a high number of NCOs and officers consider leaving the service due to treatment from a superior (Reed 2010)
- military culture norms dissuade Soldiers from complaining since loyalty is an Army value, but there is a need for soldiers to report toxic leaders to watchdog agencies and IG offices (Reed 2010)
- corrections from followers rarely exist and subordinates are unwilling to report serious ethical violations and problems stemming from a superior (Steele 2011)
- followers need to take a proactive role as "inaction is tantamount to support of the toxic leader" (Steele 2011)
- uniformed Army personnel believe that the Army is unable to effectively identify negative leaders, let alone rehabilitate them or reduce their harmful effects (Steele 2011)
- the number one reason people leave the military is poor leadership (Lamb 2020)
- "the safest course of action when confronted with a toxic leader is to suffer in silence or seek an expeditious exit" (Reed 2015)
- military institutional watch dogs (including the inspectors general, staff judge advocates, and chaplains) need to be attuned to indicators of toxic leadership (Reed 2015)
- there is little research on how one can cope in a toxic leadership environment (Blackburn 2017)
- military members have limited potential corrective actions, compared to the private sector (Blackburn 2017)
- little has been done to focus on the victims and give practical advice (Shufelt and Longenecker 2017)
- Army personnel have few options to respond to toxic leadership (Willard 2017)
- sexual harassment and bureaucratic harassment (active manipulation of rules and policies to: undermine someone's career, reduce someone's power, retaliate against the victim (for refusal of sexual advances, or other perceived offense against the leader), and prevent the victim from reporting) are related to toxic leadership (Bonnes 2020)
- newly enlisted and junior service members are particularly affected by toxic leaders... "(Service members) may not know about the resources that are available to them when toxic leadership reaches such a level that it needs to be addressed by command." (Sadulski 2018)
- the most effective mitigation is to confront and report toxic leader behaviors when they occur, but fear of retribution that can result in the end of one's career or the ability to advance one's career is a powerful deterrent (Hinen 2020)
- up to 80% of service members have encountered a toxic leader (Blackburn 2017)

Gaps in the Literature

A summary of the literature regarding toxic leadership reveals several gaps in the existing knowledge. Multiple sources recommend that affected subordinates use available tools to report toxic leadership: command open door policy, reporting to watchdog agencies (inspectors general, staff judge advocates, chaplains, EEOP and SHARP advisors), using the services of a lawyer, advocate or "other community resources," and "whistle-blowing."

These recommendations come with multiple assumptions and leave unanswered questions:

- *Are service members aware of these available tools to report toxic leadership issues?
- *Do service members know under what circumstances each tool is to be used?
- *Are service members knowledgeable of the specific steps to take to use each tool?
- *What resources are available for service members to learn how to use the tools?

*What is the preferred learning and communication style of service members?

*Do the instructional resources available match the learning styles of the users?

Recommendations and Next Steps

Service members need education and guidance regarding the resources available and steps to take for solving administrative issues and confronting toxic leadership. Strength Through Education's team members are retired military professionals, educators, advocates and life coaches. We use data-driven analytics and research-based methods to educate and empower each individual we work with. Currently, we work one-on-one with a service member to identify his/her concern, research the applicable policies and regulations, summarize and "translate" the legalese of the relevant policy and regulations, and provide these resources to educate and empower the service member with information they need to handle their own career concerns.

Our future program plans include:

- *using market research and focus groups to help us determine areas of greatest need in relation to toxic leadership's effects on the individual
- *using research-based best educational strategies for reaching the greatest number of service members through multiple mediums (website, YouTube, WikiHow, podcasts, Tik Toks, interactive documents, accessible databases).
- *creating fill-in and downloadable templates to use for filing complaint forms and drafting written responses
- *providing online checklists with steps for resolving issues
- *developing accessible lists of pertinent outside resources
- *providing a searchable database of paraphrased and correlated military policy information
- *creating online topical videos offering easily digestible direction for resolving administrative concerns related to toxic issues

Our vision is that utilizing Strength Through Education's tools will lead to positive benefits for the individual service member, leadership, the organization and the mission. We will support recruitment and retention by contributing to trust in the military, which will lead to reduced turnover intention, and increased job and career satisfaction.

References

Anderson, John A., US Army Command and General Staff College, 2019. "Preventing Toxic Leadership Through Professional Military Education."

<https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=831591#:~:text=Preventing%20Toxic%20Leadership%20Through%20Professional%20Military%20Education%20%5Bopen.be%20mitigated%20in%20the%20future%20Field%20Grade%20Officers.>

Anderson, John. Sept 3, 2019. Travis AFB News, "Moving Forward After Failure." <https://www.travis.af.mil/News/Article/1950534/moving-forward-after-failure/>

Aubrey, D. "The Effects of Toxic Leadership," Air War College, 2012, , accessed September 8, 2017, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/aubrey_toxic_leadership.pdf.

Baldor, L. Feb 8, 2018. Military Times. "Military Bullies Beware - new policy means marks on records." <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/02/09/military-bullies-beware-new-policy-means-marks-on-records/>

Bayse 2018 TOXIC LEADERSHIP: THE WAY AHEAD <AD1084118.pdf> (dtic.mil)

Beightel 2018 HOW A CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSCEPTIBLE FOLLOWERS INFLUENCE TOXIC LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS IN THE AIR FORCE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE TOXIC TRIANGLE THEORY <AD1056288.pdf> (dtic.mil)

Benson G 2018 <3645.pdf> (armywarcollege.edu) Toxic Leadership in the United States Marine Corps

Blackburn 2017 HEALING FROM WITHIN: LEARNING FROM THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED WITH TOXIC CHAPLAIN CORPS LEADERS <AD1054264.pdf> (dtic.mil)

Boger, M. Jan 31, 2016. Air War College, Air University. "Identifying Toxic Leadership Behaviors and Tools to Facilitate Their Discovery." <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1037499.pdf>

Bonnes, S. 7/13/2020 Washington Post, "What can stop sexual harassment in the military?" [Why Vanessa Guillén couldn't report being harassed. - The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2020/07/13/what-can-stop-sexual-harassment-in-the-military/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-sexual-harassment%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Asexual-harassment%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Asexual-harassment&hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-sexual-harassment%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Asexual-harassment%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Asexual-harassment)

Bradberry, T. June 17, 2015. Forbes, "Toxic Boss? How Successful People Overcome Them"

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2015/06/17/how-successful-people-overcome-toxic-bosses/?sh=1d0c3f3d337d>

Brook, T.V. USA Today: Politics, Oct 1, 2020. "Suicide rate among active-duty troops jumps to six-year high, COVID-19 stress could make it even worse." <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/01/suicide-rate-among-active-duty-troops-jumps-six-year-high/5879477002/>

Burns 2017 A descriptive literature review of harmful leadership styles: Definitions, commonalities, measurements, negative impacts, and ways to improve these harmful leadership styles [Microsoft Word - Harmful leadership.docx \(ed.gov\)](https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2017/07/27/a-descriptive-literature-review-of-harmful-leadership-styles/)

Chadwick, G. Jan 23, 2020. AFLCMC. "Understanding Workplace Hazing and Bullying." <https://www.afcmc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2059199/understanding-workplace-hazing-and-bullying/>

Cox, Matthew. Military.com. Aug 13, 2020. "Why Some Army Colonels Won't Make the Cut for Command in New Assessment Course." <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/08/13/why-some-army-colonels-wont-make-cut-command-new-assessment-course.html>

Combating Toxic Leadership Through Education and Empowerment

Diley, T. May 2, 2019. USAFCOEFS, IG Bulletin. "Toxic Leadership."

<https://sill-www.army.mil/usag/ig/docs/may-19.pdf>

Dills J, Fowler D, Payne G. Sexual Violence on Campus: Strategies for Prevention. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/campus-svprevention.pdf>

Dixon, R. Small Wars Journal. 2011. "Knowing and Caring: Leadership and the Prevention of Military Suicides."

<https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/knowning-and-caring-leadership-and-the-prevention-of-military-suicides>

Dobbs, J and Do, J. Jan 11 2018 The Impact of Perceived Toxic Leadership on Cynicism in Officer Candidates.

[The Impact of Perceived Toxic Leadership on Cynicism in Officer Candidates - James M. Dobbs, James J. Do, 2019 \(sagepub.com\)](https://www.sagepub.com/journals/doi/10.1177/0013164417700000)

"Eagle Eggs", May 20, 2015. Medium.com / Homeland Security. "Hazardous Materials: Toxic Leaders and Their Poisonous Effects."

<https://medium.com/homeland-security/hazardous-materials-toxic-leaders-and-their-poisonous-effects-2c1105731f3f>

Forsling, C. Aug 23, 2017. "The Military Has a Toxic Leadership Problem."

<https://taskandpurpose.com/leadership/military-toxic-leadership-problem>

Fosse, 2018 [Full article: Active and passive forms of destructive leadership in a military context: a systematic review and meta-analysis \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131644.2018.1480000)

Gilbert, K. July 30, 2017. Military Law Task Force. "Hazing and Bullying in the Military."

<https://nlgmilf.org/military-law/2017/hazing-and-bullying-in-the-military/>

Heitzman, 2020 [Toxic Leadership \(dodlive.mil\)](https://www.dodlive.mil/story/2020/06/20/toxic-leadership)

Hinen, 20 June 2020

[Toxic Leadership in the Military \(researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358000000)

Hinshaw, S. Sept 29, 2020

[Microsoft Word - Hinshaw Dissertation Final \(creighton.edu\)](https://www.creighton.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Microsoft-Word-Hinshaw-Dissertation-Final.pdf)

[The Long-Term Influences of Toxic Leaders on Their Followers: A Qualitative Descriptive Study \(creighton.edu\)](https://www.creighton.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Long-Term-Influences-of-Toxic-Leaders-on-Their-Followers-A-Qualitative-Descriptive-Study.pdf)

IEDP Editorial, Jan 21, 2014. "Toxic Leadership - A US Army Perspective: Anti-suicide research which is widely applicable outside the military."

<https://www.iedp.com/articles/toxic-leadership-a-us-army-perspective/>

Joiner, Gutierrez, July 19, 2019 "Suicidal Ideation and the Ability to Serve." July 30, 2019

<https://msrc.fsu.edu/sites/msrc.fsu.edu/files/MSRC%20White%20Paper%20Ability%20to%20Serve%20July%202019.pdf>

Kime, P. Sept 18, 2019, Military.com. "The Air Force Has Declared War on Hopelessness in the Ranks."

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/09/18/air-force-has-declared-war-hopelessness-ranks.html>

LaFalce, W. 2017. "Handling Toxic Leadership."

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2017/October/Handling-Toxic-Leaders-hip/>

Lamb, Jason. September 4, 2020. Air Force Times: Commentary. "Why toxic senior leaders survive -- and sometimes thrive -- in the military."

<https://www.airforcetimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/09/04/why-toxic-senior-leaders-survive-and-sometimes-thrive-in-the-military/>

Lampkin, D 2020 The Relationship Between Leadership and Stability (army.mil)

Major D 2018 UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP ON U.S. ARMY JUNIOR OFFICERS

Mattson, J. 2012, NCO Journal. "Battling Toxic Leadership"

https://www.army.mil/article/82622/battling_toxic_leadership

Military Suicide Research Consortium (MSRC)

2012 "Study reveals top reasons behind soldiers' suicides"

<https://msrc.fsu.edu/news/study-reveals-top-reasons-behind-soldiers-suicides>

MSRC, July 18, 2012. "Summary of Suicide Prevention and Best Practices"

https://msrc.fsu.edu/sites/msrc.fsu.edu/files/Suicide_Prevention_Best_Practices.pdf

Norman, G. 24 Feb 2020. Military.com retrieved

4/12/2021 <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/02/24/5-most-powerful-armies-world.html>

Padilla, Hogan, Kaiser, 2007. The Leadership Quarterly. "The toxic triangle: destructive leaders, susceptible followers and conducive environments."

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.322.4077&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Reed G 2015, [Tamished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military](https://www.george-reed.com/uploads/3/4/4/5/34450740/toxic_leadership.pdf)

Reed, G. 2004, July-Aug Military Review. "Toxic Leadership."

http://www.george-reed.com/uploads/3/4/4/5/34450740/toxic_leadership.pdf

Reed and Olsen, Nov-Dec 2010 Military Review. "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux."

https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20101231_art011.pdf

Rybacki and Cook 2016 Switching the Paradigm from Reactive to Proactive Stopping Toxic

Leadership [ifq-82_33-39_Rybacki-Cook.pdf \(ndu.edu\)](https://www.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20101231_art011.pdf)

Sadulski, J. American Military University, 2017 "It's Time to Address Toxic Leadership in the military."

<https://inmilitary.com/its-time-to-address-toxic-leadership-in-the-military/>

Service and Social Justice Think Tank, May 2014.

White Paper with Recommendations: Toxic Leadership, Flawed Logic, Sexism, and Military Sexual Assault.

https://responsesystemspanel.whs.mil/public/docs/meetings/20140529/Public_Comment_WhitePaper_ToxicLeadership_FlawedLogic_Sexism_MilSexAsslt.pdf

Sethumadhavan, P. July 26, 2019. Toxic Leadership | Human Engineers

Shufelt, J and Longenecker, C. 2017. "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses."

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Practical-Lessons/>

Steele, John P. 2011, Center for Army Leadership. "Antecedents and consequences of toxic leadership in the US Army: A two year review and recommended solutions."

<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a545383.pdf>

Templeton, A 2020 [Taking on the Toxic Triangle | Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/2020/06/taking-on-the-toxic-triangle)

Ursano, Mash and Kessler, Jan 29, 2020. JAMA Psychiatry (Journal of the Medical Association Psychiatry). "Factors Associated with Suicide Ideation in US Army Soldiers During Deployment in Afghanistan."

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2759758>

Van Winkle, Van Dahlen. USA Today: Opinion. Now 10, 2019. "Pentagon and VA: We can prevent military suicide -- together."

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/11/10/pentagon-va-we-can-prevent-military-suicide-together-editorials-debates/2525534001/>

<https://americansecuritytoday.com/pentagon-and-va-we-can-prevent-military-suicide-together/>

Willard, A 2017 A Response to "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses" [English Online Exclusive March 2017 \(army.mil\)](https://www.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20101231_art011.pdf)

Winn and Dykes, 2019 Identifying Toxic Leadership and Building Worker Resilience [F2_0319.pdf \(assp.org\)](https://www.assp.org/F2_0319.pdf)

Zwerdling, D. NPR: All Things Considered, Jan 6 2014. "Army Takes on Its Own Toxic Leaders."

<https://www.npr.org/2014/01/06/259422776/army-takes-on-its-own-toxic-leaders>