Toxic Leadership in the US Military: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract
The issue of toxic leadership in the military has been a subject of research since 2003. The consequences and impacts on service members include: lower morale and negative impact on the mission, the devastation of esprit de corps, discipline, drive and willing service of subordinates, a negative effect on marriage and homelife, high workplace stress and a loss of individual self-confidence, job dissatisfaction, poor perception of the military organization, lack of desire to re-enlist, loss of trust in leadership and the organization, suicidal ideation and connection to suicides, and other mental health problems. In 2007, the "Toxic Triangle" model articulated the three components that are needed for a toxic leader to thrive (the Destructive Leader, the Conducive Environment, and the Susceptible Followers), and it has become the widely accepted framework to date. The majority of military-based research, articles and organizational changes have focused on just two of the three components: the Destructive Leader and the Conducive Environment. Research and discussion that provides specific, actionable and clear guidance to service members negatively affected by toxic leadership (the Susceptible Followers) is significantly lacking, and there are few avenues of recourse articulated. Some of the literature suggests utilizing command open door policy, reporting to watchdog agencies (inspectors general, staff judge advocates, chaplains, EEOP and SHARP advisors), obtaining the services of a lawyer, advocate or "other community resources," and "whistle-blowing," but specific direction on how to utilize those tools is not articulated, and the authors admit that there will likely be negative repercussions for the subordinate taking these actions.

Introduction

Toxic leadership has been a major topic of research, discussion, and new policy in all branches of the military during the last twenty years. In 2003, Secretary of the Army Thomas E White asked the Army War College to address "how to effectively assess leaders to detect those who might have destructive leadership styles." In 2004, Dr George Reed, as Director of Command and Leadership Studies at the Army War College, wrote an article for the July/Aug Military Review, titled "Toxic Leadership." This article was the result of the work completed by 20 students of the Army War College. In his article, Dr Reed noted that the terms toxic leader, toxic manager, toxic culture, and toxic organization had recently begun to appear in business, leadership and management literature. In 1996, Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker had first linked "leadership" and "toxicity" when she described three types of leaders in the workplace: trustworthy (green), transitional (yellow) and toxic (red).

Definition of a "Toxic Leader"

According to Dr George Reed, in his 2015 book, Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military, there is "no consensus definition among scholars who study toxic leadership, just as there is no universally accepted definition of leadership." Dr Reed uses an operational definition in his book that "establishes toxic leadership as demotivational behavior that negatively impacts unit morale and climate." The two elements of the toxic leader syndrome, according to Dr Reed, are:

1. An apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates
2. A personality or interpersonal style that negatively affects organizational climate

The U.S. Army has chosen to use the term "counterproductive leadership" when describing leaders who have engaged in what was previously referred to as "toxic" leadership, in the doctrinal publication *Army Leadership* (ADRP 6-22) 31-July-2019 (see Part 2, Chapter 8, sections 8-45 through 8-50).

> "Counterproductive leadership is the demonstration of leader behaviors that violate one or more of the Army's core leader competencies or Army Values, preventing a climate conducive to mission accomplishment."

These descriptions encompass a broad spectrum of behaviors, and include many different problems and characteristics. According to these definitions, for any behavior to be "toxic," there also needs to be a negative impact on subordinates and/or on the organization.

The Toxic Triangle Model

In 2007, Paddilla, Hogan and Kaiser developed the "Toxic Triangle" as a model to articulate the three components that are needed for a toxic leader to thrive. There is ample research that shows that toxic leadership exists within this Toxic Triangle, and this model has become the accepted framework for the preponderance of research to date. The three components of the Toxic Triangle are: the Destructive Leader, the Conducive Environment and the Susceptible Followers.

The Destructive Leader and the Conducive Environment

The vast majority of research and articles on the subject of toxic leadership (in the military and in the world of business) focus on just two of the three components: the Destructive Leader and the Conducive Environment. Focusing on the Destructive Leader as a person, and defining the characteristics of toxic leaders is included in the research of Steele 2011, Dixon 2012, Bozer 2016, Blackburn 2017, Burns 2017, Beightel 2018, Benson 2018, Fosse 2018, and Sethumadhaven 2019. Suggestions for rehabilitating a toxic leader are also put forth, which include mentoring, improved leadership training programs, and officer education.

The Conducive Environment is the military organization itself. Articles and research that articulate which aspects of a culture and organization are most likely to lead to the development of toxic leaders include those written by Rybacki and Cook 2016, Bayse 2018, Sethumadhaven 2019, Winn and Dykes 2019, Hinen 2020, and Lamb 2020. Discussions and arguments about

why it is important to address the culture of an organization that is conducive to toxic leadership are presented by Aubrey 2012 and Brook 2020. Reed 2004, Mattson 2012, Bozer 2016, Bayse 2018, Benson 2018 and Cox 2020 address how to recognize and assess leaders who are toxic. Changes to the military's selection and promotion process is discussed by Reed 2010, Steele 2011, Forsling 2017 and Cox 2020. Articles that recommend changes to the military organization and culture are put forth by La Falce 2017, Willard 2017, Beightel 2018, Major 2018, Anderson 2019, Bonnes 2020, Heitzman 2020, Hinen 2020 and Hinshaw 2020.

The Susceptible Followers

The third branch of the triangle, the Susceptible Followers, which encompass the ranks of the enlisted service members and any other subordinates within a chain of command, has received considerably less attention. Current research includes: data analysis to determine the percentage of service members that perceive themselves to be negatively impacted by toxic leadership, subordinate behavior (reactions) in relation to toxic leadership, and the consequences and impacts of toxic leadership on service members (to include: workplace stress, job dissatisfaction, poor perception of the military organization, lack of desire to re-enlist, loss of trust in leadership and the organization, suicidal ideation, other mental health problems, and connection to suicides).

Lack of Actionable Guidance for Followers

Noticeably lacking is military-based research and discussion that provides specific, actionable and reasonable guidance to those negatively affected by toxic leadership. What is the best course of action that "followers" can take in order to mitigate the negative impacts from a toxic leader, and what resources are available? Some of the available information is essentially only applicable to the civilian workplace environment (suggestions like, "avoid the leader," or "change jobs"). Specifically, since the data has now indicated that 80% of service members have encountered a toxic leader (Blackburn 2017), guidance and direction for military-appropriate responses when being negatively impacted by a toxic leader were significantly lacking. A few writers and researchers suggested that "teaching and training (of targets/victims) was needed to resolve counterproductive leadership issues," and the necessity of targets reporting instances of toxic leadership abuse was stressed. However, there were very few specific recommendations. Especially troubling were the recommendations for the service member to get an advocate or a lawyer to help with issues, since an internet search for "military advocate" only resulted in results for private lawyers (which the average service member cannot afford).

After twenty years of research on the issue of toxic leadership in the military, there is very little guidance or education available to the affected subordinates themselves. There are specific crimes that can be the result of the most extreme form of toxic leadership, such as bullying, hazing, and sexual harassment and assault. For victims of these crimes, there is clearly articulated policy and legal procedure. For service members who are experiencing the negative effects of a toxic leader that is less extreme, there are few avenues of recourse. Command open door policy, IG complaints and "whistle-blowing" are recommended in some of the literature, but the same articles then go on to state that the military organization "lack(s)

sufficient mechanisms to provide subordinates with opportunities to give leaders feedback or seek redress at higher levels" (Aubrey, 2012). Multiple authors also admit that there are likely to be negative repercussions for the subordinate doing the reporting.

Recommendations for the Susceptible Followers (2004 - 2015)

This review of the literature will focus on recommendations and guidance articulated for the followers who are negatively impacted by toxic leadership. In the article "Toxic Leadership" (Reed, 2004), Dr Reed acknowledges the fact that "subordinates are generally not in a position to address the problem." Military culture encourages "suffering in silence," and abused subordinates tend to "wait out" toxic leaders (through frequent PCSing). Through his research, he discovered that fully two-thirds of negative behavior is never directly questioned or reported. He asserts that unmasking leaders through organizational changes will be most effective, and that solving the problem could help retention. In 2010, Reed and Olsen wrote "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux." The authors recognize the fact that military culture norms dissuade soldiers from complaining. Since Loyalty is an Army value, there is a conflict between loyalty to one's leader and unit, and duty to oneself. However, despite the "real possibility of retribution," the authors state that soldiers need to report toxic leaders to watchdog agencies and IG offices. Additionally, Reed and Olsen recognize that the IG "needs to protect whistleblowers."

In 2011, John Steel wrote "Antecedents and Consequences of Toxic Leadership in the US Army" for the Center of Army Leadership. His two year review of the CAL/CASAL reports from 2009-2011 and inclusion of contemporary research produced a report that contained System level, Leader level and Follower level solutions. His recommendations for Follower-level solutions were as follows:

- Take a proactive role; inaction is tantamount to support of a toxic leader
- Take advantage of programs to build personal resilience (MSAF Army 360, and Comprehensive Soldier Fitness)
- Use ingratiating tactics to make yourself less of a target; this will send the message, "pick on someone more problematic"
- Use reframing to try to see the bright side of the situation

In his conclusion, Steele acknowledges that "uniformed personnel believe the Army is unable to identify and/or rehabilitate toxic leaders."

Other papers put forth advice for followers. Mattson (2012) asserts that NCOs have a duty to help junior soldiers identify and stop toxic leadership, and that NCOs can teach junior soldiers what to do and how to purge it, but there are no specific instructions or recommendations for exactly how this should be accomplished. An IEDP Editorial in 2014 restates Matsuda's 2010 recommendation that "followers need to have a route to express their views and feelings about leaders," but did not articulate the route to accomplish this.

Bradberry (2015) recommends that followers use his information to identify which of the seven "types" of "bad bosses" they have, and use that information to neutralize the behavior. This advice was written for the business world, not the military, so it is not completely applicable or

possible to follow. The seven types of bad bosses, and what should be done to neutralize the behavior is as follows:

"The Inappropriate Buddy" is too friendly and has no boundaries. Followers should set boundaries and not be intimidated by the boss.

"The Micromanager" can be neutralized if the follower proves to be flexible, competent and maintains constant communication. The follower should also get insight into the boss's expectations and meet them.

"The Tyrant" is a Machiavellian leader that maintains power through coercion or intimidation. The recommendation is to present your ideas that lets the boss take partial credit, and to choose your battles wisely.

"The Incompetent" holds a position beyond their capabilities. The follower needs to swallow his/her pride and share his/her knowledge and information that the boss needs to grow into the role.

"The Robot" is only interested in numbers and has no connection to the subordinates. The follower needs to try to connect as a person with the boss, and to always have data to back up his/her ideas.

"The Visionary" is a boss that can't focus on the task at hand and is always moving to the next idea. Followers should ask specific questions that require the boss to focus on details of the current task. Additionally, followers should not refute the boss's ideas directly.

"The Seagull" swoops in and "squawks" without taking time to get the facts straight. The group needs to agree to communicate to the boss that the team needs to take a calm approach.

Publishing of Tarnished (2015)

Tarnished:Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military (Reed, 2015) is sourced from more than fifty pieces of research and material. Reed's book was acknowledged as a thorough handling of the subject of toxic leadership, in relation to the military world, by reviewers at the time. Chapter 6 is titled, "Surviving a Toxic Leader," and Chapter 8 is "Mitigating Toxic Leadership."

"Surviving a Toxic Leader"

In Chapter 6, while acknowledging that no two situations are exactly alike, and there are "no substitutes for counseling, therapy, or legal services that the victims would most benefit from," Reed does form some "rules of thumb that can be helpful in weathering difficult situations." Noting that the sources of the time have "no shortage of bad advice on the subject of toxic leaders" and they often fail to "take into account the unique context of the military," Reed attempts to articulate methods that would be applicable to military situations. He notes that an important differentiation must be made between the most extreme toxic leaders (those who are "at the extreme and destructive end of the spectrum") and the mildly toxic leader, since the most extreme and destructive type of leader "might not be approachable." For the subordinate of a mildly toxic leader, Reed states that "being a good follower includes the obligation to try... (to let the leader) know that they are leaving you feeling belittled and demeaned." Reed lists the suggestions for how to confront a toxic leader from Linda Durre, recognizing that some may not be applicable to a military setting.

Know what your issues are, make a list of what you want to say.
Rehearse the conversation, ask a friend for feedback.
Turn off cell phones and office phones, listen to what the boss has to say.
Keep everything confidential; assure the boss of your intentions for a win-win outcome.
Act professionally. Know what you have control over.
Prepare to be fired.
Start out positively, state the negative issues, end positively.
Don't attack or blame.
Give clear and simple solutions.

"The Safest Path"

Reed defines the "safest path" and states that "the sad truth of the matter is that the safest course of action when confronted with a toxic leader is to suffer in silence or seek an expeditious exit." Noting the frequent turnover in military assignments, Reed suggests volunteering for schools, courses or other assignments. Recognizing that "waiting it out (can be) exhausting," he recommends stress reduction and resiliency techniques, a healthy diet and a focus on physical fitness. Practicing "emotional detachment" and becoming "comfortably numb," and ignoring as much harmful behavior as possible is also suggested. Reed notes that "toxic leaders are fundamentally flawed and will eventually self-destruct" so the subordinate should "keep in mind that what goes around comes around eventually."

Reed highlights the "positive outcomes associated with working for a bad boss." These include the fact that "it can be a remarkable learning experience full of negative examples that are instructive in their own right." It is also "beneficial to gain experience in working with those who are different, quirky and even trying." The act of "building tolerance for those who are dislikable or disagreeable is an exercise in patience and humility." It can also be an exercise in optimism to "(learn) to focus on those bright spots while minimizing the darker aspects of (the toxic leader's) personality" and can build "interpersonal calluses."

"The Courageous and Risky Path"

Acknowledging that "actions beyond suffering in silence and leaving bring increased levels of personal risk," Reed notes that "the safest actions for an individual are not necessarily the best thing for the organization." Reed then outlines "The Courageous and Risky Path." He first suggests the option of complaining to the next level in the chain of command (Reed notes that this "is encouraged in all military organizations.") His caveat to this suggestion is that the "toxic boss has easier access to his or her supervisors" and the "toxic leaders don't look so bad from the top down." It is commonly accepted that "facilitated by the organizational dynamics... most toxic leaders have been rewarded for their behavior" due to successful mission accomplishment. Therefore, Reed warns not to try this suggestion if the toxic leader is extreme since "appeals to (their) better nature are likely to fall on deaf ears." He does note that "some enlightened commanders are receptive to complaints" and "they will intervene with the toxic leader in order to develop or coach them to a more fruitful path." Commanders have the option of "initiating an administrative investigation upon receipt of information about leadership behavior that is inconsistent with the underlying values of the organization." If the investigation

produces enough documentation and information to justify an intervention, it could include removal from a leadership position. "However, it may be an ego-busting, humiliating and tragic occurrence for the person getting sacked, and wounded bears are the most dangerous. If it turns out the allegations were unsubstantiated (or even if they are substantiated) complainants should not expect a warm reception. Despite regulatory and legal protections to prevent retribution on whistle-blowers, often there is still a price to pay."

Reed's next suggestion is to go to the office of the Inspector General (another official outlet for grievances) "when the chain of command is the problem or fails to respond to legitimate complaints." The complainant "should keep detailed notes with times, dates and witnesses" to carefully document what happens and when. Reed notes that anonymous or secondhand complaints typically have the lowest priority and will not receive much attention. An Article 138 complaint is another avenue for redress for "an act of omission that is in violation of a law or regulation beyond the legitimate authority of the commander (as a) means to address unfairness or an abuse of power." There is no option of anonymity, as the aggrieved person must submit the complaint in writing through the chain of command. Reed notes that a legal assistance attorney or civilian attorney will likely be needed to draft the complaint.

His final suggestion is to initiate a congressional complaint to a senator or representative. Reed notes that "if the options presented in this book and others are unsatisfying to those working for a toxic leader, that is because there just aren't that many good answers." He acknowledges that "those who wind up under a toxic leader have drawn a bad hand," and "the best approach to dealing with toxic leaders is not by individual action by less powerful subordinates, but through systemic and organizational approaches that identify and remediate the unhealthy dynamics that allow toxic leaders to exist and multiply." The burden of remediating the problems of a toxic leader are "too great for subordinates, dedicated and loyal as they might be. They just do not have the power, status and prestige to pull it off."

Reed asserts that "to be a good follower, there are circumstances when it will become necessary to confront a powerful supervisor and give voice to disagreements." He notes that the follower will be "faced with a negative outcome in all directions… the only options will be bad, terrible, awful and catastrophic," and it will require "no small measure of moral courage." Given the serious "consequences of dissent by courageous followers," Reed urges followers to "be selective in voicing opposition and avoid confrontation over trivial matters." Notably, Reed states:

> "Good followers are not mere sheep or mindless automatons… Followers have an obligation to challenge and disobey when lives are being risked unnecessarily, common decency is being violated, laws are sacrificed to expediency, the organization's purpose is undermined, the organization's stakeholders are denied a basic service, and when special interests are being served at the expense of the common good."

This exhortation to fulfill the obligation of a follower is then tempered by this final warning;

> "When going over the head of a toxic leader, do not expect to be appreciated for taking a principled stand. It is best to anticipate that your time in the organization is coming to an end and that this sometimes means the end of a promising career.

"Mitigating Toxic Leadership"

In Chapter 8, "Mitigating Toxic Leadership," Reed addresses his audience (military leadership) directly and states, "the first step in fixing a problem is realizing you have one." Organizational efforts to reduce toxic leadership are outlined. A discussion is included of the need for the military organization to focus more on personality type and emotional intelligence when evaluating individuals for leadership positions. Reed acknowledges that "the promotion and command selection processes that exclusively rely on top-down assessments are as likely to promote a toxic leader as one who is not toxic." Noting that the civil sector has human resources offices and other mechanisms for complaints, but in the military when "followers know (they) are being abused, but aside from the drastic step of filing a complaint they have few means of signaling when there is a problem," Reed stresses the importance of military "institutional watchdogs" to be "especially attuned to indicators of toxic leadership;" These include the inspectors general, staff judge advocates, and even chaplains.

Research on Toxic Leadership (2016 - 2020)

Components of "Capable Followers"

Rybacki and Cook's 2016 paper, "Switching the Paradigm from Reactive to Proactive: Stopping Toxic Leadership," offers specific guidance to change from Padilla's "Toxic Triangle" (Destructive Leader, Conducive Environment, Susceptible Followers) to the "Transformative Triangle" (Value-based Leadership, Positive Environment, Capable Followers). Focusing on the aspect of the followers in both models, Padilla asserts that there are two types: Conformers and Colluders. Conformers have unmet needs, low maturity, and low core self-evaluation. Colluders, on the other hand, have ambition, a similar worldview as the toxic leader, and similar "bad" values. Rybacki and Cook pull from multiple sources to present their vision of Capable Followers. Recognizing that leadership is not exclusively just about the leader, and that all relationships are variations of leader and follower, the components of Capable Followers are articulated:

> "Upstanders" do not stand idly by in negative situations. Upstanders balance the system and become a check to others. Followership is not weak, passive and conforming.
>
> "Lower Level Leadership" is important because followers are not explicitly subordinate; the most optimal leadership exchange has followers taking responsibility. Followers have a direct stake in leadership because individual betterment is good for group betterment.
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> "Penchant for Proper Dissent" is a key component of a unit; upstanders will question leadership and "can enhance mission effectiveness when they appropriately challenge the status quo" (O'Connell). Reed acknowledges that superiors "might be the last to observe (toxicity)," so he places some of the burden on the follower. Followers owe their leaders the truth.
>
> "Unity of Effort" involves collaborating effectively with all members working in the same direction. Interdependence leads to achievement of common goals.

With increased small unit cohesion and teamwork, there is less turnover, more positive evaluations, commitment and support.

"Equal Loyalty to Mission, Leadership and Organization" requires horizontal (peers and unit) and vertical allegiances (organization). The most effective followers are committed to a purpose beyond themselves.

Coping in a Toxic Environment, Chaplain Corps case study

In *Healing From Within: Learning from Those Who Have Lived with Toxic Chaplain Corps Leaders,* published at the Air Command and Staff College, Air University in April 2017, Chaplain Jeremiah L Blackburn, Captain USAF, noted, "There is little research on how one can cope in this (toxic leadership) environment." As an attempt to fill this void, he completed a research case study of nineteen Chaplain Corps members who were subordinate to toxic leaders. In his acknowledgements, Blackburn expresses appreciation to Dr George Reed for providing consultation and guidance, and utilizes Dr Reed's definition of a toxic leader, which is: someone who has "an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates, a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organization climate, and a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest." In his introduction, Blackburn states, "There are substantial amounts of research that address how to identify or prevent toxic leadership, different discussions on whether a toxic leader can be rehabilitated, the effects of toxicity on followers or teams, but very little on how one can cope in this type of environment." His case study research addresses three broad categories: dynamics of the toxic leader, how the team was affected and coped, and how the individual was affected and managed stresses during and after.

One of his stated primary objectives was to look for resiliency tactics, and a secondary objective was to identify factors that can lead to greater resilience of a subordinate. Most resiliency research focuses on how individuals recover from trauma and the individual's ability to "bounce back" from life's situations. Blackburn notes that the Chaplain Corps promotes resiliency, so he anticipated that the personnel in the study would potentially have competent coping and recovery skills.

In his review of the literature, he notes that the Army has established leadership doctrine regarding toxic behaviors, but the other branches have not. He summarizes the findings regarding the organizational impact of toxic leadership, to include: lower morale and negative impact on the mission, the devastation of "esprit de corps, discipline, drive and willing service of subordinates" (as found by Doty), a negative effect on marriage and homelife (Judith Black), high stress and a loss of individual self-confidence (Webster and Matsuda).

Vicki Webster's research with 76 subordinates of toxic leaders found numerous problem-solving strategies for coping and negative patterns for coping. Problem-solving strategies included: confronting the leader, making a formal complaint, practicing personal well-being, seeking support from others (mentors, colleagues, family or friends), escaping the situation (resigning or retiring), bypassing or ignoring the leader, and reframing (through professional support, positive thinking, humor and maintaining professionalism). Negative patterns included: helplessness,

self-blame, working harder and rumination. Blackburn's review of the literature also found the following coping strategies: break the train of thought of mistreatment and "let it go," and look for opportunities in the negative environment to learn.

Blackburn acknowledges that "military members have limited potential corrective actions, compared to the private sector." Through study of his subjects, Blackburn found that the individual affects were varied, but overall very negative, in general. His subjects' most used coping methods included: focusing on self care, maintaining relationships with others, and participating in physical activity. Mental strategies used included: journaling (writing MFR's for a record), establishing healthy boundaries with the leader, saying "no" or confronting the leader, using problem-solving to "play to the leader's ego," and protecting one's personal time (by taking vacation, going home on time at night). As expected, many of the subjects used spiritual coping strategies: reframing things in prayer, living his/her religion (fasting and praying for the leader, serving the leader).

Notably, not one of the nineteen subjects reported the leader or initiated an investigation. Their stated reasons for this were varied. Some felt they could not provide enough proof, if they tried to report. Some were dissuaded by the fact that the toxic leader "got results," so the superiors may or may not know that they are toxic (and may not care). In addition, subjects felt that the toxic leader was well-connected to those who could help (the toxic leader's superiors), so they believed nothing would get done. One participant was threatened not to share, or the leader would retaliate. In addition, the majority of the subjects requested anonymity for two reasons: they did not trust the Chaplain Corps and felt their careers would be in jeopardy, and/or they wanted to protect the toxic leader (and not do permanent damage to the leader's reputation).

Blackburn made two suggestions that would help subordinates to have a safe outlet; one suggestion was a specific change that could be made to the structure of the Chaplain Corps, and the other was to implement 360-degree feedback up the chain of command.

"Practical Lessons"

In 2017, Shufelt and Longenecker wrote "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses" for *Military Review*. They immediately acknowledge that "little has been done to focus on the victims and give practical advice." Standardized leadership doctrines have defined the behaviors of toxic leadership, which allow for easier identification; these can be found in Army Doctrine Pub 6-22 *Army Leadership* and Army Reg 600-100. In addition, the authors outline ways that the Army has begun to track the behaviors of toxic leaders. The Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) has occurred annually since 2005. The Center for Army Leadership report of 2011 (based on CASAL 2009, 2010) offered potential solutions to the problem of toxic leadership. The recommendations for followers were to improve their own personal well-being and to ingratiate themselves with the toxic leader (so as to have less of a negative effect). Their key research findings were as follows:

1. Subordinates must accept that they cannot change the boss

"Suck it up and drive on" (avoidance, deflection, etc)
2.Put yourself in your boss's shoes
3.Get on the same page as your boss; Army regulations require counseling that directly focus on leader expectations and subordinate execution, so this should be used utilized
4.Work hard to know your boss's strengths and weaknesses
5.Establish your brand and make it a practice to underpromise and overdeliver ("the lead horses are always given more work")
6."Know when it is time to go" is the last recommendation. However, since the authors recognize that just leaving and finding another job is NOT an option in the military, they recommend that followers know how to report toxic leadership using the chain of command, IG, chaplain, EEOP, SHARP advisor, or "other community resources." (Notably, there is no indication of where or how a service member is to learn how to do this.)

Response to "Practical Lessons"

Shortly after "Practical Lessons" was published by Shufelt and Longenecker, Maj Alex Willard published his response to the article (2017). He is critical of Shufelt and Longenecker's suggestions, noting that "toxic leaders" are fundamentally different from "bad bosses," in that toxic leadership is a form of abusive supervision. Willard defines abusive supervision as "a process in which over a longer period of time the activities, experiences and/or relationships of an individual or the members of a group are repeatedly influenced by their supervisor in a way that is perceived as hostile and/or obstructive." He then poses the question, "When faced with a situation that fits the above description, what options do Army personnel really have?"

Willard states that Shufelt and Longenecker's key findings are generally good recommendations for anyone dealing with a bad, ineffective boss, but "they do nothing to address working for a toxic leader who repeatedly inflicts harm on individuals and organizations." Willard is particularly critical of the recommendation "know when it is time to go," as this appears to condone one toxic employee pushing out good employees. He states, "If the goal of talent management is identifying, developing, retaining, and promoting the right people into the right position, then Shufelt and Longenecker's key finding is anathema to the long-term effectiveness of the Army." He acknowledges that the Army currently allows toxic leaders to remain not because their bosses are "oblivious to their toxicity, but because the bosses care more about the accomplishment of short-term goals than the long-term individual and organizational health of the institutions over which they have responsibility." He continues:

> "Under such circumstances, confronting a toxic leader may often not only be regarded as an affront to the offending individual, but also as an affront and personal slight to the rater who oversees such an individual. In such a command environment, Army personnel serving under a toxic leader should tread carefully; in the current zero-defect Army mentality, one negative Officer Evaluation Report can ruin a career. Similarly, even indirect, passive actions like requesting to change jobs or talking to a trusted senior officer outside the chain of command carries real career risk. Additionally, because the Army spends so little time defining toxic leadership—much less advising personnel what

> to do when they encounter it—any official reporting of it can be brushed aside as nothing more than a personality disagreement."
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> A renewed commitment to creating an enforceable, useful peer-review program within the Army would help unmask and weed out toxic leaders earlier in their careers to the overall benefit of the organization and its personal development process.
> Second, dedicating time and smart people to better educate the entire force by enhancing current doctrine must also be part of the solution. Third, initiating a direct reporting line would help foster individuals' willingness to report instances of toxic leadership. Finally, leaders at all levels must impart the value of candor to their formations by actually demonstrating it during formal counseling with their subordinates. The previous suggestions will undoubtedly incur organizational costs, but the long-term gains associated with investing in people will far outweigh the costs.
>
> By comparison, the current lack of organizationally structured measures or guidance by Army leadership to enhance leader accountability means there is no real guidance on how to deal with a toxic leader in the military. Until that void is filled, Army personnel have little recourse but to accept many of Shufelt and Longenecker's recommendations that exhort persons to be individually proactive by striving to focus on solving difficult problems of the organization irrespective of the toxic environment suffered, while also showing military respect to the office your toxic boss may hold. Focus on your work, make those around you better, learn from your experiences, keep your head down, hope the Army gives you better future bosses, silently endure, and read academic journals, not doctrine, to learn more about the organizational value of talent management."

Bullying and Hazing

As noted earlier, there are specific crimes that can be the result of the most extreme form of toxic leadership, which can include bullying and hazing. "Hazing and Bullying in the Military" (Gilberd 2017) focused on that problem from the victim's perspective. Gilberd states that victims are vulnerable, and it will be difficult for them to report and remedy the problem, but he offers some suggestions for the victim.

His first suggestion is that the victim is likely to need an advocate or a lawyer; although there is no guidance as to where to find an advocate, and he does note that there will be difficulties for the victim to do this. He also suggests that the victim report to command, military law enforcement or the IG. He tempers this suggestion with the recognition that going through the chain of command may be ineffective; open door policies only allow victims to reveal their complaint to their commander, and the complaint does not necessarily go further up the chain of command. An IG investigation is helpful, Gilberd states, but conduct varies from office to office. The victim will need to reference service and DOD regulations, have a full explanation, witness statements, and copies of all pertinent documents, in order to go to the IG. If the IG finds the report unsubstantiated, however, other complaint procedures will be more difficult to pursue, he notes. If command is unresponsive and the IG is not effective, Gilberd suggests that the victim may need to make an Article 138 complaint. He recognizes that an advocate or a lawyer may be

needed to follow up with the IG, and to communicate directly with the commander, command Staff Judge Advocate or Legal Officer. He notes that intervention by the advocate and/or attorney may "force command to follow the rules."

The Leader and the Environment

Publicly available material in 2018 related to toxic leadership in the military focused more closely on the leader and the environment aspects of the Toxic Triangle. Bayse (2018) explores tools for the Army to better identify toxic leaders, the relationship between Army culture and toxic leadership, and asks if the Army is inadvertently developing leaders to be toxic.

Beightel (2018) "applied ordinary least squares path analysis to determine the influence susceptible followers and characteristics of a conducive environment have on toxic leadership behaviors in the Air Force." His results revealed a direct influence between collusive followers and toxic leadership, and a direct effect from two characteristics of a conducive environment (ethics, and absence of checks and balances). Two additional characteristics of the conducive environment had an indirect effect on toxic leadership (instability and favoritism) through susceptible followers. One of Beightel's conclusions is the need for implementing a system of checks and balances. Baldor (2018) articulates the details of new Pentagon policy (DOD 1020.30), which is an effort to eliminate harassment (a result of toxic leadership).

Benson (2018) proposes a clear definition of a toxic leader for the US Marine Corps, suggestions on how to assess toxic leaders, and preventative measures to compliment current training to correct toxic tendencies. Dobbs and Do (2018) find a positive relationship between toxic leadership and organizational cynicism. Major (2018) studied the impacts of toxic leadership on US Army junior officers and proposes that more leadership theory training is needed within all leadership curricula.

Toxic Leadership and Attrition

In Sadulski's article, (*It's Time to Address Toxic Leadership in the Military*, 2018), the focus is on the high cost of toxic leadership in terms of attrition. Toxic leadership creates high levels of stress and inherent mistrust between leaders and subordinates. This often leads to qualified service members leaving the armed forces when their enlistment ends. He notes, "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's recommendations include better leadership training, and setting an effective command climate to reduce attrition.

Toxic Leadership, Stress and Suicide

Notable articles and research in 2019 have more focus on followers. These include papers for a military and non-military audience. Winn and Dykes (2019) note that the resilience of followers is eroded when the environment is conducive to toxic leadership ("nobody seems to care") and followers are tolerant ("young people with little experience and a penchant to please others"). Van Winkle and Van Dahlen (2019), writing from the Pentagon Office of Force Resiliency, focus on preventing military suicides. Matsuda's research in 2010 found that "suicidal behavior can

be triggered by toxic command." Other researchers have found connections between increased stress, suicidal ideation, and toxic command. Van Winkle and Van Dahlen recommend increased access to mental health care, a reduction in the stigma from receiving care, and more training to build coping skills.

Anderson (2019) blames toxic leadership, physical assessment tests and the flawed promotion system for increased suicide and suicidal ideation in his article, "Moving Forward After Failure." He is very concerned that, "Airmen too often seek permanent solutions to temporary problems." Anderson's work at the US Army Command and General Staff College (2019) focuses mostly on organizational changes in "Preventing Toxic Leadership Through Professional Military Education." However, within his case study, he notes the importance of using the chain of command and the IG to confront toxic leadership.

Kime (2019) highlights the ways that the Air Force has tackled toxic and uncaring leadership. Attention is called to the "AF Wingman Outreach" facebook group that was created on August 7, 2019. 37,000 members of the group have called attention to issues with bad leadership (the most common facebook thread), unresponsive mental health services, concerns about security clearances, and fears of being stigmatized. Kime notes that Former AF Chief of Staff Gen David Goldfein recognized that programs, processes and trainings don't reduce suicide; it "all comes down to someone caring and helping."

In addition to these, Fosse (2019) performed a meta-analysis of two kinds of destructive forms of leadership (passive and active) in a military context to determine if one was more destructive than the other. Fosse found that both passive and active forms may contribute equally to detrimental outcomes. Brook (2020) calls attention to the military's hopes to bolster access to mental health services, noting that young enlisted troops are 61% of suicide deaths but 43% of the military population.

The Need for Improving Leaders

Research and articles related to toxic leadership in the military were also numerous in 2020. Lampkin (2020) directly addresses "today's NCOs" as his audience, and he sympathizes with struggling leaders when he states, "No Soldier joins the U.S. Army dreaming of becoming a toxic leader." He addresses four areas that "leaders can improve to produce long-term trust and confidence in their subordinates, peers, and superiors." Cox (2020) cites top-down organizational changes for the promotion process when he outlines two new assessment programs, the Colonel Command Assessment Program and the Battalion Command Assessment Program, that were designed to reduce the number of toxic leaders promoted. Lamb (2020) also calls for organizational changes and states that "retaining and promoting toxic leaders is an injustice." He notes that the number one reason people leave the military is poor leadership, so the organization must improve transparency and accountability in order to engender trust and confidence.

Sexual and Bureaucratic Harassment

Bonnes (2020) focuses on sexual harassment and bureaucratic harassment, both related to toxic leadership. Bureaucratic harassment is described as 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. Examples of bureaucratic harassment can include citations for small or nonexistent infractions that can harm career chances. Bonnes asserts that "more bureaucracy" does not help because perpetrators "find ways to undermine or ignore the rules." He concludes that there must be changes made to military culture. Related to bureaucratic harassment, Ursano (2020) writing for the Journal of the Medical Association of Psychiatry, in "Factors Associated with Suicide Ideation in US Army Soldiers During Deployment in Afghanistan" finds that legal problems are one cause of stressors and suicidal ideations. Heitzman (2020) highlights a new Leadership Development Course at Air University, Maxwell AFB, that focuses on building emotional intelligence, developing exceptional leaders and combating toxic leadership tendencies.

Toxic Leaders in the Business World

Hinshaw (2020) writes for the business world and asserts that organizations need to establish clear expectations for their leaders and to empower followers to hold leaders accountable to leadership expectations. Templeton (2020) also addresses the business world, specifically millennials. Noting that millennials have become the largest population segment holding full-time jobs, he characterizes these workers as "more willing to demand fairness, less willing to stay in a workplace that doesn't provide it, and more likely to jump ship quickly, whether or not they have a new job lined up." Dixon (2012) also noted that millennials have high expectations for themselves, need constant feedback, and have a desire to offer input (versus the directive leadership of the military). Templeton advocates for workers to take agency over their own careers (rather than leave a toxic situation) and work to drive change.

Confronting Toxic Leaders

Although Hinen (2020) places responsibility for rooting out toxic leadership in the military on senior leaders, he does directly address the behavior of followers. Senior leaders, those above the toxic leader, allow toxic leadership to exist, either unwittingly or knowingly, he states. Non-toxic leaders can create toxic environments by not dealing with incompetent subordinates, and by their inaction or inability to make timely decisions. These inactions allow problems to "develop, then fester and ultimately, create a toxic environment." Hinen notes that "incompetent subordinates can contribute to a toxic environment due to their technical shortcomings or low emotional quotient." He asserts that the most effective mitigation is to confront and report toxic leader behaviors when they occur, at the same time that he recognizes the factors that form a powerful deterrent to confronting and reporting. He acknowledges that "confronting and reporting can be difficult because of the rank structure, the power and authority granted to commanders, and the self-sacrifice and loyalty expected from subordinates." 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. He states that the military is addressing this fear of reporting through its professional military education programs, although he is not specific. His final advice is for the subordinate

to understand that “the current environment is temporary since either the toxic leader or the suffering subordinate will eventually rotate to a new assignment.”

Conclusion

A review of the literature reveals that there is little concrete advice for the subordinate who is suffering under toxic command. Options to seek redress are difficult, unclear, potentially expensive, and likely to lead to retribution and negative effects on one’s career. Reed (2010) states “Our nation entrusts its military leaders with the most precious resource it has to offer… its sons and daughters who selflessly volunteer to serve, often at great personal hazard.” In Tarnished (2015) Reed laments, “Why must service members have to die before attention is given to destructive leadership?”

The research demonstrates a clear systemic component to toxic leadership, and Padilla’s Toxic Triangle asserts equal weight to the Destructive Leader, Conducive Environment and Susceptible Follower. During the last twenty years, some organizational changes have been developed, and new promotion assessment practices are being utilized, but subordinates are still not given many options or hope for redress to the negative consequences when subjected to a toxic leader.

Our military is a volunteer force, with a smaller number of qualified (and interested) individuals choosing the service option each generation. At the end of Tarnished (2015) Reed succinctly states:

“Those who enter the U.S. military today are some of the most educated and motivated men and women to swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution. Their service is noble and should be celebrated. They deserve to be led in a way that honors their service and sacrifice.”

For Further Research

Toxic leadership contributes to serious problems in the military. The three components necessary for toxic leadership to exist are the Destructive Leader, the Conducive Environment and the Susceptible Followers. Military-based research and organizational changes have primarily addressed the Environment and the Leader. A review of the literature concludes that the Followers (service members) need to use existing tools to report toxic leadership issues.

Do service members know:

- What are the existing tools available to report toxic leadership issues?
- Under what circumstances is each tool used?
- What are the specific steps to take to use each tool?

If the answers are “no:”

- 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?

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