

# THE ALLURE OF TOXIC LEADERS: WHY FOLLOWERS RARELY ESCAPE THEIR CLUTCHES

by: [Jean Lipman-Blumen](#) Issues: [January / February 2005](#). Categories: [Leadership](#).

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*Toxic leadership is a growing — and costly — phenomenon. Yet individual and organizations can stop the insidious spread of toxicity, by understanding why we are seduced by the false promises of toxic leaders, and by setting up organizational defence mechanisms to counter the spread of toxicity. This author has some excellent suggestions.*

*This article is based on her book, The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them, Jean Lipman-Blumen (New York: Oxford University Press), 2005.*

A curious paradox surrounds toxic leaders wherever they take the stage, from the executive suite to the religious pulpit. It is this: While most of us followers complain about toxic leaders, nonetheless, we almost always stay the course. How do we explain that paradoxical scenario, evident in virtually every society from earliest recorded history?

Why do we followers not only tolerate, but so often prefer, and sometimes even create toxic leaders – in for-profit corporations, non-profits, government, even educational and religious institutions? Why do we permit so many toxic leaders to hold sway in virtually all arenas of human endeavour?

As you might suspect, there are no easy answers here. Yet, a major part of the answer can be pieced together from three enduring sources: the internal needs and human condition of the

followers; the interactions between followers and their own environments; and followers' relationships with toxic leaders. Toxic leadership entails a complex dynamic, but one whose components we must identify and confront if we are ever to break its hold on us.

While the topic of toxic leaders, *per se*, is perhaps more titillating, the main focus of this paper actually is their *followers*. My central questions are: What are the forces that repeatedly propel followers to accept, favour and sometimes create toxic leaders? Why do we so frequently allow toxic leaders to have their way with us and leave on their own timetable, under their own steam? Secondly, in this paper, I shall try to suggest some personal options for individuals and policy options for organizations seeking to escape the destructive impact of toxic leaders.

## Defining toxic leaders

Although followers are my primary concern, to set the context for our discussion, we nonetheless need to define "toxic leaders." That is an exasperating task, at best, since my toxic leader may be your heroic saviour. Besides, any individual toxic leader does not necessarily operate in toxic mode in all situations, nor all of the time even in the same circumstances. To complicate matters, when we compare different toxic leaders, we see that they exhibit varying degrees and types of toxicity. Besides, the consequences of their toxic decisions and actions also differ considerably. To capture the complexity of toxic leaders, we probably need a multidimensional framework, one that addresses their intentions, their behaviour, their character, and the impact of the consequences of their decisions and actions.

Let's also be clear that we are *not* talking about commonplace difficult bosses and political leaders, whom we grouse about around the water cooler. Nor are we holding out for a plaster-saint version of leadership. Even if we were, saints are not likely to elbow their way to the front of the leadership queue.

Thus, we can take as our working definition of toxic leaders those *individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even the nations that they lead.*

Given that we usually recognize toxic leaders for what they are, why do we followers not only accept, but often adulate, and occasionally abet their toxicity? My purpose is not to blame the many of us who have suffered at the hands of toxic leaders. Rather, I hope by this discussion to help liberate us by offering one explanation of why we fall prey to them and also by proposing a set of strategies for releasing us from their thrall.

# Why Do We Want Toxic Leaders?

There are several key reasons for our attraction to toxic leaders:

First, strong yearnings for toxic leaders percolate up from our unconscious, where *psychological* needs send us in search of authority figures who can offer us comfort and promise to satisfy some of our deepest longings. Many of these psychological needs that feed our hunger for toxic leaders are related to Abraham Maslow's (1971) well-known hierarchy of deficiency and growth needs. (Originally, Maslow outlined a five-level hierarchy, ranging from physiological needs, like food and shelter, to needs for safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. In 1971, Maslow revised his concept of growth needs in two important ways. Below self-actualization, he identified cognitive and aesthetic needs. Maslow also described a level beyond self-actualization that is particularly relevant to our yearning for toxic leaders: transcendence. Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*; 1971, New York: Viking Press).

Maslow's hierarchy and other related psychological needs make us long for leaders – good, bad and somewhere in between. The most relevant psychological needs are those for authority figures to replace our parents and other early caretakers; for membership in the human community; for a conception of ourselves as significant beings engaged daily in noble endeavours in a meaningful world; for the hope that we can live at the centre of action, where powerful leaders congregate to make important decisions. Our fears that we are personally powerless to challenge bad leaders also contribute to our reluctance to confront them. These and still other psychological needs make us seek and respond to leaders who assure us they can fulfill those yearnings.

Let's not forget that, at the lower end of Maslow's hierarchy, we are driven by our more *pragmatic* needs. We often stick with toxic leaders because working for them pays the mortgage and the kids' dental bills, provides political, occupational, and other types of important access, and lets us share in additional attractive benefits that they provide. Incidentally, these pragmatic needs are the ones we most easily recognize.

A *second* set of needs, this time *existential* needs, sprouts from our poignant awareness of our own mortality. The tension between the certainty of our death and the uncertainty of when and how it will occur gives rise to what philosophers have called "existential angst." The consoling hope that our existence will have served some meaningful purpose allows us to live without paranoia and despair. Toxic leaders feed this hope by persuading us that we belong to "The Chosen" (be they Trump "apprentices" or members of the Aryan race).

Our existential anxiety and hankering for a life of meaning render us supremely vulnerable to leaders who insist that they can make us safe, instill our lives with significance, and ensure our eternal life—either physically here or in another world, or symbolically, in the memory of generations yet unborn. As their followers, we work endlessly on what Otto Rank called our “immortality projects,” be they a Thousand Year Reich or the rollout of next year’s innovative product line. (Rank, Otto. (1932/1968). *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development*. New York: W. W. Norton).

Because consciously focusing on our disconcerting angst would surely immobilize us, we tend to submerge our anxiety below our angle of vision. From the depths of our unconscious, it relentlessly drives us to find relief in the form of toxic leaders, who dangle assurances of safety, meaning and immortality before us.

A third set of needs stems from the *uncertain, disorderly world* in which we all live. As humans, we are constantly bombarded by uncertainty, change, turbulence and crises. Living in a post-9/11 environment only heightens our sensitivity to these forces and increases our “situational fears,” to borrow Elemér Hankiss’s term. (Hankiss, Elemér; 2001, *Fears and Symbols: An Introduction to the Study of Western Civilization*, Budapest: Central European University Press). Added to our existential angst, these “situational fears” give rise to an increased need for certainty and orderliness. Leaders who promise us an orderly, predictable and controlled world can look very attractive when everything around us seems about to fall apart.

Fourth, psychosocial needs arise from the interaction between the individual (replete with psychological needs, existential anxiety and situational fears) and his or her demanding environment. More specifically, within any society, individuals must come to grips with their culture’s norms for achievement, in order to develop the self-esteem we all require to function as effective individuals.

If we meet society’s standards of achievement, our self-esteem grows. When we exceed those norms, others hail us as leaders and heroes, rarely distinguishing between the two. Since we tend to see ourselves through our society’s eyes, we, too, believe our success signifies that we are potential leaders.

By contrast, when we fail to meet our culture’s achievement norms, we have two major choices. We can join a subcultural group whose norms are less exacting or even antithetical to those of the mainstream culture, like gangs or cults. Or we can crown as leaders others who *do* exceed the norms. When we join up with these outstanding individuals, stronger and smarter than we are, we can feel vicariously accomplished, powerful and protected.

Fifth, we humans have always lived in an *unfinished and unfinishable world*, a world in which the explanations our parents took for truth we recognize as partially incorrect or totally mistaken. Thus, in each era, certain knowledge is overwritten by newer, more accurate knowledge, casting doubt upon related assumptions. And just when we thought the limits of human achievement had been reached in a particular field of endeavour, such as flight, we watch breathlessly as some daredevil astronaut steps out onto the surface of the moon. Thus, the world offers would-be heroes and leaders endless and almost unimaginable opportunities for heroic action. The possibilities for immortal achievements incessantly beckon us.

A related force—the unique threats and challenges of each historical moment—sounds another call to leadership and heroism. In one era, highwaymen and pirates threaten our carriages and ships; in another, terrorists fly jet aircraft into skyscrapers. In one century, syphilis looms as a killer disease; in another, AIDS becomes the scourge. Thus, each historical moment poses specific, urgent problems calling for solutions from those strong, smart and spirited enough to take up the gauntlet. The intrepid individuals who meet these challenges are acclaimed heroes whom we would follow to the ends of the earth.

Finally, there is another, more auspicious and quite relevant aspect of the human condition: our openness to the countless opportunities that lie before us. We are particularly taken by invitations to exceed the achievement norms of our society, at least vicariously. We are readily seduced by possibilities of participating in a noble vision that will infuse our life with meaning and set us apart for all time as shining heroes—at least in our grandchildren's eyes.

**The real tragedy of the human condition is not that we all must die, but, rather, that we choose to live by grand illusions, rather than to face our fears. Hence, we fall into the clutches of toxic leaders who promise us the moon, knowing full well they cannot deliver. In the worst of all cases, toxic leaders fall under the spell of their own grand illusions and believe that they can.**

## Grand Illusions versus noble visions

A serious caveat regarding noble visions is in order here. Unfortunately, we frequently fail to distinguish between the *noble visions* of non-toxic leaders and the *grand illusions* of their toxic counterparts. *Noble visions* stake out realistic, but difficult, achievements designed to benefit humankind. They demand cooperative efforts by leaders and followers and call out the best in us. They create ennobling opportunities to contribute to society.

*Grand illusions*, by contrast, entail *unrealistic nirvanas*, a world purified not by improving ourselves, but by eliminating contaminating others, be they our business competitors or just any

group different from us. Toxic leaders insist that they alone are the saviours who can protect us from enemies and offer us the certainty, order and immortality for which we so fervently yearn.

Now, you may be impatiently wondering: What does all this have to do with our vulnerability to toxic leaders? Most of our human anxieties and needs call for a calming presence, someone or something that can reassure us that everything is under control and that we are safe. We simultaneously yearn for the exhilaration of noble enterprises that may earn us immortality.

Unfortunately, a hard look at reality suggests there is no real panacea. Life will always be uncertain, unpredictable and tumultuous. Moreover, for each of us, it will inevitably end in physical death. That painful reality, however, does not keep us from searching for someone who can calm our fears and promise us a glorious, perhaps eternal, future. And that is exactly where toxic leaders enter the scene.

Toxic leaders comfort us with reassuring and often grand illusions that life in the factory or in the family will work out just fine. By signing on to their grand illusions, we can work on our immortality projects. There are only two catches. For one, to achieve this desired state, we must agree to do just as the leader says-no ifs, ands or buts. Thus, just like when we were children, dependent upon parents whose rules we followed in exchange for love, safety and Oreos, we now trade our obedience and autonomy for the toxic leader's pledge of security, certainty and other goodies, including a shot at life eternal.

The second catch is equally serious. Toxic leaders do not fulfill their promises, but not because they wouldn't fulfill them if they could. Rather, they do not honour their pledges because, by their very nature, these promises are unfulfillable. The guarantees of safety, certainty, success, endlessly soaring stock prices, immortality and other desiderata are simply illusions.

The real tragedy of the human condition is not that we all must die, but, rather, that we choose to live by grand illusions, rather than to face our fears. Hence, we fall into the clutches of toxic leaders who promise us the moon, knowing full well they cannot deliver. In the worst of all cases, toxic leaders fall under the spell of their own grand illusions and believe that they can. Jeffrey Skilling, former CEO of Enron, predicting an astronomical spike in the next year's stock price just as the company was imploding, is but one classic example.

***Strategize about how the group will confront the leader and try to structure the confrontation as constructively as possible. If possible, frame your concerns in terms of organizational impact, that is, how the leader's decisions and actions have negatively affected the organization and the people in it***

# Rationalizations and control myths

Still, most toxic leaders—with the exception of heads of state—lack armies or secret police to keep us in line. So, just how do these destructive leaders keep us from rising up against them once we recognize their toxic ways? Sadly enough, toxic leaders don't have to do much, if anything, to keep us from defying them, much less unseating them. We followers keep ourselves in line by ingeniously manipulating our own anxieties and needs.

First, we fashion for ourselves a set of *rationalizations* — telling ourselves that we *can't* resist for any number of reasons: We are not strong enough to confront the leader; no one else thinks the leader is toxic; we can't take the chance of endangering our careers and our fortunes, and a host more.

Then, we forge those untested rationalizations in the kiln of our existential anxieties, our psychological needs and our situational fears. They eventually harden into far more powerful *control myths* that warn us we *shouldn't* dare resist. Otherwise, we now firmly believe, the leader will crush us with overwhelming force; our colleagues will turn against us; or we'll be “downsized,” maybe outright fired, just a few years shy of collecting our retirement package. Untrammelled by the need to keep their self-controlling followers in line, toxic leaders are free to go about their destructive business.

## Is there any hope? Some strategies for breaking the hold of toxic leaders

Fortunately, there are various ways of dealing with toxic leaders, ranging from the cautious to the courageous. There are both *personal options* that individuals can select and *policy options* that organizations can adopt to break the hold of toxic leaders.

### Personal options

Personal options all require *keeping your cool* as you navigate the choppy seas one invariably encounters in any effort to confront or capsize a toxic leader.

- **Do your homework.** That can mean several things. For one, *investigate* the toxic leader's *history*. Did that individual leave a toxic trail in previous leadership positions, like CEO Al Dunlap left at Scott Paper before he re-enacted his destructive drama at Sunbeam? *Document* this *history* and *share* it with colleagues who may still be holding unrealistic hopes that the leader will change his or her stripes.

While you are at it, remember to *keep a log* documenting the leader's behaviour in your organization. This will be invaluable when you are challenged to cite chapter and verse of the toxic leader's poor decisions and destructive actions.

For another, *consult with trusted colleagues* who interact with the same leader. Seek the advice of the *opinion leaders* and those individuals everyone recognizes as *wise organizational owls*. You will probably discover that you are not the only one who sees the leader's toxic warts.

- Create a coalition. If you are suffering, most likely others are experiencing similar problems. *Strategize* about how the group will confront the leader and try to *structure the confrontation as constructively* as possible. If possible, *frame your concerns* in terms of *organizational impact*, that is, how the leader's decisions and actions have negatively affected the organization and the people in it.
- Avoid *solo confrontations*. Confrontations without witnesses open the possibility for the leader to twist the encounter into a "you said/she said" scenario. Bringing a small, but well-regarded, group to a confrontation with the leader will impress upon him that you are not alone, that influential others share your concerns, and that this meeting is completely on the record. *Offer to work together* with the leader to improve the situation, but insist upon *benchmarks and timelines* for improvements.

## More drastic personal measures

If you hit a dead end, more drastic measures may be in order. Then, you might consider one or more of the following options:

- Create a *strategy for undermining or ousting* the leader. Deciding to undermine or topple a leader is a difficult moral and political choice. At what point does the leader's toxic behaviour warrant this kind of problematic action, which could possibly drag you, too, down a toxic slope?
- Sometimes, all other avenues are blocked, and the toxic impact of the leader's decisions and actions is great and growing greater. Then, this may be the only available alternative, other than soldiering on at the risk of becoming complicit in the leader's toxicity.
- Initial planning for ousting a toxic leader is usually best done quietly at first, with a relatively small, committed group. Eventually, however, an open call to arms may be necessary.
- Here, too, *documentation* is key to convincing potential collaborators.
- Your *due diligence* should alert you to which of the *leader's peers* and which, if any, *members of the board*, share your concerns. Approach the leader's peers and board members one at a time. Yet, here again, a small coalition of informed and influential followers, representing the larger group of disaffected followers, works best. When you have convinced a critical (both in numbers and status) nucleus of board members, that is the time

to arrange a meeting of the executive committee of the board. If the executive committee sees the light, it is their responsibility to convene the entire board to consider the problem.

- Alerting the *media* or appropriate *regulatory bodies* may be the only remaining way to stop the damage if the board refuses to act in the face of demonstrable unethical or criminal practices. This step is fraught with danger and difficulty. Due diligence is necessary to ensure that the media and/or regulatory sources you choose to enlist have a record of unshakeable integrity. And be certain that the documentation you provide is accurate and supportable by supplementary data from other sources.
- At this point, of course, you have entered the territory of the whistleblower, a terrain loaded with land mines. This is not a task for the faint of heart or for those who want a quick resolution. And, before you select this course, consider the inevitable impact not only on you, but also on close associates and family, who may suffer “collateral damage.” Nonetheless, looking yourself in the eye may leave you little choice.
- Leaving is also an honourable strategy, particularly when you are convinced either that you and your collaborators cannot prevail or that the toxic impact is limited solely to you. Some followers depart when the physical or psychological impact grows too great to bear. When leaving is the only way to preserve your integrity and/or your mental or physical health or that of your family, it’s probably time to go. Social, financial and/or political costs may also figure into the calculus. Remember, martyrdom is not a necessary part of honour.

## Organizational policy options

Organizations have the prerogative of setting policy options to preclude or limit the ravages of toxic leadership. Although this list is not exhaustive, here is a set of policy options that can serve to prevent or delimit the dysfunctional consequences of toxic leadership:

- *Term limits.* To paraphrase Lord Acton’s famous dictum, “Endless power corrupts endlessly.” Limiting the length of time a leader may stay in a role is probably beneficial both to the organization and the leader.

There is a recognizable trajectory of effectiveness in which the new leader progresses from an initial honeymoon period of innovation, change and high expectations to a peak of productivity and creativity. After some period of time, tried-and-true methods—even the ones that created earlier innovations, change and booming productivity—tend to tire and wane. A plateau has been reached, or a decline may be evident. Such conditions are likely to induce more toxic measures as they did in Mao Tsetung’s China—to fuel continued success. This is also where the Peter Principle commonly comes into play.
- **Periodic 360 degree reviews of individual leaders.** Confidential reviews of leaders by those with whom they interact frequently and intimately would go far toward giving those leaders a clear perspective on their strengths and limitations.

- **Respectable departure options.** Many leaders become overly comfortable with their power and perks. So, it is probably worthwhile to construct a set of *respectable departure options* to ease the leader's leave-taking before toxicity takes serious hold. One such option might be a *transition year* after officially stepping down. For this period, the organization could provide the former leader with a stipend, an honorific title, an office and adequate administrative support to reflect upon, and possibly write about, his or her recent leadership experience in the organization. That would serve not only as an honourable structural transition into the elder statesperson role, but also as a useful chapter in the organization's memory to be drawn upon for future needs.
- **Open and democratic leadership selection processes.** Transparency in the processes designed to identify and select leaders will help ensure the appointment or election of leaders with non-toxic backgrounds. Lacking open procedures, due diligence may be seriously hampered. This doesn't mean all aspects of the selection committee's work must be conducted in public. Nonetheless, at key inflection points, the larger organizational community should be consulted and asked for anonymous feedback. This process should include safeguards to allow other organizational members to provide candid feedback without endangering themselves.

Selection committees should include knowledgeable *individuals from various internal levels* of the organization, not simply external board members. These internal participants understand the history, the culture, the nuts and bolts of the organization, and its shortcomings. Their internal intelligence and experience can contribute greatly to setting the criteria for an acceptable and effective leader and vetting candidates.

Yet, putting a solo member of a less powerful constituency on the selection committee can undercut that individual's effectiveness. Consequently, representatives of mid- and lower levels of the organization need an adequate cohort on the committee to enable them to speak out effectively.

- **Constituencies educated to deal with their anxieties.** Educating constituencies to confront their anxieties and fears is no small task, but an essential one, nonetheless. This necessitates a long-term strategy that sequential leaders must insist upon maintaining. Education helps us understand and cope with the fears and anxieties that make us vulnerable to the illusions of toxic leaders. It also tends to liberate us from narrow and stereotypical thinking.
- **Regular accountability forums.** When leaders are required to hold regular town-hall meetings or accountability forums, there is increased likelihood that they will think more deeply about the decisions and actions that they have taken or are considering. When leaders expect to be asked regularly to explain the thinking behind their initiatives, they inevitably must become far more reflective and self-conscious as they engage in their leadership activities.

Accountability discussions must focus not simply on *outcomes*, positive or negative, but

also on the *processes* by which decisions were reached and actions taken. *Sources of information and counsel*, as well as *pressures* to take one course of action versus another, should be examined publicly. Leaders who are reluctant to confront or, worse yet, unable to recognize their mistakes are probably well on their way to toxic leadership.

- **Protective mechanisms for whistleblowers.** In some countries, the federal government protects whistle-blowers with official, if cumbersome, programs and policies. While such protective mechanisms are far from ideal, the private sector has yet to catch up with them. Most whistle-blowers encounter grave risks to careers, families and fortunes. Their actions, however, provide great benefits to the organization and all those connected to it. Thus, we need to develop more effective ways to enable people with evidence of leaders' malfeasance, both unethical and criminal, to step forward without suffering devastating consequences.

In sum, toxic leadership is a costly phenomenon. It destroys individuals, groups and organizations, even countries. Failing to deal resolutely with the complex forces that foster our acquiescence to toxic leaders will only promote the destruction such leaders create.

Organizational policies can help provide structural defences against the paradox of toxic leadership, but followers cannot avoid their personal responsibility for serious reflection and change. By examining why we buy into the comforting illusions that such damaging leaders peddle, we begin to dispel the allure of toxic leaders.

## About the Author

[Jean Lipman-Blumen](#)

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