

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN THE U.S. ARMY**

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## ABSTRACT

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The extent to which toxic leadership exists in the U.S. Army is a question that demands a thorough examination. While most publications on military leadership focus on the positive aspects of good leadership, this project examined the current literature on destructive leadership styles. This paper sought a definition of toxic leadership, consolidated expert views on the personal characteristics of toxic leaders, and compiled a taxonomy of eighteen types of toxic leaders. The project serves as a review of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army. It derives insights into toxic leadership in the Army; why it exists, why it is tolerated and what impact positive leadership may have on this phenomenon.



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## TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN THE U.S. ARMY

Army leaders must set high standards, lead by example, do what is legally and morally right, and influence other people to do the same. They must establish and sustain a climate that ensures people are treated with dignity and respect and create an environment in which people are challenged and motivated to be all they can be.

—U.S. Army Field Manual 22-100

Solid leadership is the cornerstone of a successful military. The U.S. Army absolutely depends on it. What happens however, when that solid leadership turns out to be solidly bad? What happens when leadership is so bad that it hangs over an entire organization like a toxic cloud that suffocates everything and everyone it comes in contact with? Does this happen in the Army? If so, why does it happen? Does the Army tolerate it? Why in the world would the Army tolerate toxic leadership? Can positive leadership play a role in eradicating it or militating against its detrimental effects?

It is appropriate to begin with an examination of the phrase “toxic leadership” and examine why the term toxic is accurate. In *Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them*, Jean Lipman-Blumen would say it is because toxic leaders “have poisonous effects that cause serious harm to their organizations and their followers.”<sup>1</sup> Toxic leaders can be characterized as leaders who take part in destructive behaviors and show signs of dysfunctional personal characteristics. “To count as toxic, these behaviors and qualities of character must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations. The intent to harm others or to enhance the self at the expense of others distinguishes seriously toxic leaders from the careless or unintentional toxic leaders.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, there are varying degrees of toxicity in this damaging disorder. At one end of the spectrum, dysfunctional leaders may simply be unskilled, unproductive and completely unaware of the fact that they are lacking in the necessary talent to lead. At the other extreme, toxic leaders will find their success and glory in their destruction of others. Be it psychological or even physical, they will thrive on the damage they can inflict on others. In any case, this toxic leadership “plummets productivity and applies brakes to organizational growth, causing progress to screech to a halt.”<sup>3</sup>



## PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Experts have identified a number of characteristics attributable to toxic leaders. The following compilation of traits provides a starting point for better understanding of toxic leadership. Although all of these characteristics are significant, they are listed from the least significant to the most severe. Many of these descriptions overlap, and while it may be difficult to determine a bona fide difference among some of them, they represent authoritative views of the phenomenon that serve as a departure point for study. In most cases of toxic leadership the leader will present not just one, but a combination of traits. Intuitively, the more of these traits the leader displays, the more toxic the leader is considered.

Many authors explain these unfavorable traits in terms of Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs.<sup>4</sup> Maslow categorized human needs into a five-level pyramid and suggested that people move upward as needs at a particular level are met. The levels start with basic *physiological* needs forming the base and then ascend through *safety*, *love and belonging*, *esteem*, and finally, *self-actualization*. Until needs and desires are met at any given level, the individual cannot progress to the next level. While "trustworthy leaders usually operate at level four or five,"<sup>5</sup> destructive leaders are still concerned with meeting their *safety* needs at level two or possibly their *love and belonging* needs at level three. Their behavior indicates that they have not begun to address their *esteem* needs at level four. This results in many of the following negative personal characteristics.

### INCOMPETENCE

Incompetence results from the lack of the required skill, capability, and aptitude that are required to complete the function. It may include a failure to understand the mission or task at hand, a continued failure to comprehend the problems and issues associated with the task and ultimately a failure to determine the best way to solve problems and overcome issues.<sup>6</sup>

### MALFUNCTIONING

Leaders who malfunction are focused on their own insecurities and are therefore unable to focus on the mission, organization, or followers.<sup>7</sup> Most of their time, energy, and effort are spent on themselves, leaving little attention or interest for anything else. Not only does the leader malfunction, so does the organization.

### MALADJUSTED

Leaders who are viewed as maladjusted are "insecure about their own accomplishments, often with good reason, having avoided the personal risk, discipline, and hard work needed to

succeed in earlier circumstances.”<sup>8</sup> They are maladjusted to their surroundings, their position, their organization, and certainly to their followers.

#### SENSE OF INADEQUACY

Similarly, “all toxic leaders have a deep-seated sense of inadequacy.”<sup>9</sup> The sense of inadequacy may be based on either real or perceived “chinks in the armor,” but nonetheless, the self-doubt is ever present. In its most extreme form, this self-doubt can bring about a leader whose only feels competent when destroying others.

#### MALCONTENT

The malcontent leader is an extremely bitter leader, an unhappy person, a disgruntled soul who is angry about past failures and determined to make the world pay. This leader is not satisfied with anything-- self, others, circumstances, and displays this dissatisfaction through angry outbursts, rants and tirades.<sup>10</sup>

#### IRRESPONSIBLE

Leaders who possess the characteristic of irresponsibility refuse to answer for their actions. They have “reckless disregard for the costs of their actions to others as well as to themselves.”<sup>11</sup> They see no need to do what is right, because they see no penalty for doing what is wrong.

#### AMORAL

A step beyond irresponsible is amoral. Leaders who are amoral are often also irresponsible and see themselves as outside the particular moral code. Not only will they not take responsibility for their actions, but their amorality “makes it nigh impossible for them to discern right from wrong.”<sup>12</sup>

#### COWARDICE

Cowardice in a leader is about much more than a simple lack of physical courage as on a battlefield. It is about the lack of resolve, determination, and steadfastness in times when tough decisions must be made. It is about being unable or unwilling to make the tough decisions. This type of leader does not recognize this weak point and is therefore not able to make a necessary change.<sup>13</sup>

## INSATIABLE AMBITION

While ardent ambition may qualify as a positive personal characteristic for a good leader, insatiable ambition does not.<sup>14</sup> A leader who has an unquenchable desire for power, prestige, money, success and glory will obviously do whatever it takes to satisfy that desire at any cost. It may mean compromise of operation, organization, people or all of these. This leader will put ambition above all else.

## EGOTISM

As with ambition, a healthy ego by itself may not be a particularly negative attribute. However, egotism in a leader is a dysfunctional trait that can destroy an organization. The leader's exaggerated sense of self worth, constant focus on self, and inability to distinguish between the real self and the imagined self clouds self-perception and thus limits the capacity for self-renewal.<sup>15</sup>

## ARROGANCE

To take this idea of self worth a step further, leaders who are arrogant and overly certain of their own superiority to all others are not only consumed by their self worth, but also by the fact that they are convinced that they can do all things a cut above all others. Because of their self-perceived perfection, they cannot fathom making mistakes. This arrogance prevents them from "acknowledging their mistakes and instead leads to blaming others" for all that goes wrong.<sup>16</sup> Nothing will ever be their fault, but they will not hesitate to find and lay blame wherever it is otherwise convenient.

## SELFISH VALUES

Good leaders are those who genuinely care about the mission, organization and their subordinates, and put those entities before self. "Toxic leaders, by contrast, do not develop values that place organizational needs high."<sup>17</sup> This concept of selfish values encompasses more than merely lack of selflessness. It encompasses that notion that the values someone holds are focused excessively on self. For the most part, values are usually directed toward the good of others or the good of all. Toxic leaders maintain values that are purely "self-centered and self-promoting."<sup>18</sup>

## AVARICE AND GREED

One of the self-centered values results in yet another dysfunctional characteristic: avarice and greed. Those in this category place an inordinately high value on the accumulation of

wealth and financial gain. Avarice and greed will take a toll on the organization and the people in it.

#### LACK OF INTEGRITY

Lack of integrity on the part of a leader will result in a lack of trust on the part of followers. A lack of trust will cause a good business to lose money, a good government to lose credibility and a good military to lose lives. There is absolutely no room in leadership for a lack of integrity. It “marks the leader as cynical, corrupt, hypocritical, or untrustworthy”<sup>19</sup> and is both deplorable and intolerable in any leadership situation.

#### DECEPTION

Toxic leaders know that lack of integrity, selfish values, insatiable ambition, irresponsibility and all the other character flaws they may possess are not acceptable in their roles as leaders, therefore they must embrace yet another flaw-- deception. They must attempt to deceive others about their character flaws and self-serving motives.<sup>20</sup> Knowing they are supposed to care about the organization and its people, they will provide lip-service to a sense of concern, while their genuine loyalty is to themselves. They “hide their intentions most of the time, since their true intentions are socially, morally and organizationally unacceptable.”<sup>21</sup> This constant deceit yields an absolute contradiction to the faith, confidence and trust necessary for good order within the organization.

#### MALEVOLENT

Leadership author Jean Lipman-Blumen describes toxic leadership as characterized by several “mals,”<sup>22</sup> Three mals have already been mentioned: malfunction, maladjusted, and malcontent. The remaining three appear to be the most extreme of all the characteristics that are included here. Malevolence in leadership is the persistent, severe hatred for others that these leaders have in order to counter their own insecurities. They wish for the misfortune of others and then revel in it. They “secretly cheer when coworkers, superiors, and subordinates fail, even when the well-being of the entire organization is threatened.”<sup>23</sup>

#### MALICIOUS

Maliciousness takes malevolence a step further. These leaders actually inflict the harm on others they feel such malice toward, often whether there is personal gain in it for them or not. “Rancor, malice, enmity, and spite are the trademark emotions” of these leaders, and they enjoy the insult of revenge on others.<sup>24</sup>

## MALFEASANCE

Finally, “haughty, arrogant, and insecure, toxic leaders sometimes cross the thin border between unethical or unprofessional behavior and illegal behavior.”<sup>25</sup> This can result in malfeasance. Their perceived self-importance has them convinced that rules and laws do not apply to them. This can result in behaviors that are internally and externally devastating to an organization, especially in the public sector where public trust and confidence are greatly valued.

The worst case scenario occurs when a number of these negative traits are combined in a leader. It is now evident why so many authors use Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model. A number of these dysfunctional personal characteristics illustrate the toxic leader’s inability to get past low level survival needs; level three, and in many cases level two. In their book, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima suggest that the most extreme toxic leader is not getting the basic *safety* needs met and therefore has issues of “insecurity, yearning, sense of loss, fear, obsession, and compulsion.”<sup>26</sup> In less extreme cases, the individual may be getting safety needs satisfied, but misses out on *love and belonging* needs. This type of leader has a feeling of “self-consciousness, feelings of being unwanted, feelings of worthlessness, emptiness, loneliness, isolation, and incompleteness.”<sup>27</sup>

## TYPES OF TOXIC LEADERS

At first glance toxic leadership connotes an evil bullying person, but the reality is that toxic leadership can present in much milder types or in a multitude of types between these extremes. Recall that the penultimate of toxic leadership is in the harm done to the organization and the followers. The nature and degree of harm that results helps to characterize the toxic leader type.

### THE ABSENTEE LEADER

The absentee leader is detached from the organization and the people he is charged with leading. He is only involved in the decision making, future planning, and program executing because of his physical presence in the organization. He seems to be mindless because his mind is only on himself and obtaining the approval of others for himself. His absenteeism creates “chaos and malaise from the turmoil and infighting perpetrated by underlings who are malevolent and who sense a leadership vacuum.”<sup>28</sup> When all is said and done, followers want leaders; they want to be lead. If the leader is disengaged or absent, the followers find

themselves in a state of disorder and confusion with little hope of a vision for a way out of the mayhem.

#### THE INCOMPETENT LEADER

Aside from possessing the fundamental characteristic of incompetence discussed previously, in her book *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters*, Barbara Kellerman submits that the incompetent leader also lacks the will to sustain effective action within the organization.<sup>29</sup> He may be incompetent due to a lack of skill, but he may also be “careless, dense, distracted, slothful or sloppy.”<sup>30</sup> He may be unable to effectively act and react in times and situations of uncertainty and stress, and he may be unable to successfully communicate his ideas, educate his subordinates, or delegate any authority to his competent supporters.<sup>31</sup> Followers not only want leadership, they also want competent leadership. The nonexistence of a competent leader results in a flailing organization that might only witness positive activity based on the followers actions and in spite of the leader, not because of him.

#### THE CODEPENDENT LEADER

Although codependency usually brings to mind the idea of the relationship issues of a person living with, and putting up with, another person who has a dependency on a particular bad habit or vice, the codependent leader is one who brings to the table the imperfections and limitations that exist as a result of the “social system that develops around these types of relationships.”<sup>32</sup> The codependent relationship is based on the codependent following a harsh set of rules in order to conceal the behavior of the dependent. “This results in emotional repression that creates great stress for the codependent person,” which he then takes into his leadership behavior.<sup>33</sup> He will act and react to the followers in his organization in the very same manner as he does or did to his dependent accomplice. He will take personal responsibility for their substandard performance and make no attempt to correct it for fear of hurting their feelings. He will take on more work and responsibility than is rightfully his and then become very angry with the amount of work that has been pushed on him. He is a peacemaker who would rather cover up problems than face them, in an effort to balance the groups system.<sup>34</sup> The result on the followers and the organization is distrust, uncertainty, and neglect for addressing bona fide problems, issues, and the future of the organization.

#### THE PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE LEADER

The passive-aggressive Leader has “a tendency to resist demands to adequately perform tasks.”<sup>35</sup> He has an intense fear of failure and therefore is reluctant to deliver his best

performance because it may not be up to standard and would then result in failure. If he does too well, it may mean that he will be promoted and then be expected to perform at an even higher level, which could in turn result in failure. His unwillingness to perform well equates to “procrastination, dawdling, stubbornness, forgetfulness and intentional inefficiency.”<sup>36</sup> The passive-aggressive Leader is impetuous. He will have a sudden outburst of anger or frustration and then immediately be regretful. He will complete his task, but then be resentful for having it forced upon him. Followers live on pins and needles, constantly wondering when the next outburst will be and for what reason. The organizational response is resistance and aversion on the part of the followers who wish to prevent an outburst. Under such conditions positive change to the organization is near impossible.

#### THE BUSYBODY LEADER

The busybody leader is energetic, restless, constantly in motion and full of unfocused vigor.<sup>37</sup> He may give full focus to one project or topic for a period and then jump to another for no apparent reason, leaving those around him confused and in a daze. He yearns for the spotlight and must be the center of attention. He works long, hard hours, but it is unlikely to remain focused on any one given task. He is relentlessly “scanning, roving, pressing, talking, traveling, planning, plotting, giving speeches, cajoling, joking, flattering, and working –always working,” or at least making a grand performance of working.<sup>38</sup> The busybody leader is manipulative and firmly establishes himself as the center of information flow in order to further manipulate those around him. He will “fail to make decisions that resolve conflicts among subordinates, assuring that the flow of complaints and information about conflicts and therefore attention received will be continuous.”<sup>39</sup> His manipulation, unfocused energy and persistent movement leave the organization bewildered and unclear about where the focus is or should be.

#### THE PARANOID LEADER

The paranoid leader may be brilliant, of mediocre intelligence, or somewhere in between. He is convinced others are trying to chip away at him, his performance, his leadership, and ultimately his achievements. Regardless of his brilliance or lack thereof, he is completely insecure about himself and his skills, and is “pathologically jealous of other gifted people.”<sup>40</sup> He will not tolerate any variety of criticism, because he views it as a personal attack; an attempt to undermine him and his authority. He will become hostile toward anyone who he perceives is attempting to undermine him. Despite how innocent or genuine a remark or action might be, the paranoid leader assumes there are hidden intentions behind it. This fear and paranoia drive him to seek total control of everything that takes place in the organization. “Excessive staff

meetings and reporting are often the result of this need to keep close tabs on those around him.<sup>41</sup> If someone else attempts to exert control, or appears to be attempting to control any part of organizational activity, he will deal harshly with the individual. In time, followers will learn to be very passive and keep all comments, opinions and observations unto themselves. This passivity, along with jealousy and hostility, foster an organization full of fear, anxiety, and trepidation. The only initiative exercised in such an organization is that which the paranoid leader can force through by himself.

#### THE RIGID LEADER

The rigid leader is “stiff and unyielding”<sup>42</sup> and is “unable or unwilling to adapt to new ideas, new information, or changing times.”<sup>43</sup> As one might expect, rigidity may very well have its place in leadership as determination or steadfastness of purpose, but in the current age of constant change, flexibility has the overwhelming edge over rigidity. The rigid leader is convinced that he is right and that he is the only one who is right. He is therefore loath to entertain any other opinions. He will surround himself only with followers who think as he does, so that he does not have to be confronted by conflicting or dissenting opinions. As long as the followers in the organization think as he does, conform to his ideas and visions, and do not disagree with or dispute anything in which the rigid leader believes, they will work well in his reign. The serious consequence is that the organization will become stagnant, inflexible and nonproductive due to the absence of change.

#### THE CONTROLLER LEADER

Very similar to the rigid leader, the controller leader takes rigidity one step further. This is a perfectionist who craves certainty and surety. “The only way controllers feel they can achieve the certainty and surety they need is to make decisions themselves.”<sup>44</sup> While the rigid leader will surround himself with like-thinkers and delegate certain authorities to those who agree with him, the controller leader cannot and does not delegate. He will be intimately involved in every decision, big or small. The controller leader is process-oriented, and while he does not have a grasp of vision and the future of the organization, he is extraordinarily preoccupied with processes related to the conduct of daily operations. He is “disdainful of people who are not excited by or involved in the implementation of ‘efficiency incurring’ processes to make everything neatly identified and hierarchical.”<sup>45</sup> Because of the controller leader’s rigidity and perfectionism, his followers suffer personal angst and fear because they have no input to the process or outcomes. The skilled, intelligent followers are stifled, while



others merely go through the daily motions; all are micromanaged, again leading to absence of positive change.

#### THE COMPULSIVE LEADER

The compulsive leader possesses traits of the rigid leader and the controller leader with a twist. He is similarly rigid, has the need to completely control all aspects of his life, and “pursues perfection to an extreme,” but he also has emotional glitches of which he is probably unaware.<sup>46</sup> He is angry, resentful, and rebellious on the inside and believes it is wrong to express his true feelings.<sup>47</sup> His need to firmly control his own feelings results in his efforts to control everything else. However, because of the inner turmoil, “it is common for such persons’ repressed anger to be expressed in sudden and violent outbursts.”<sup>48</sup> The outbursts and violent behavior contribute to an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among followers.

#### THE INTEMPERATE LEADER

The intemperate leader “lacks self-control.”<sup>49</sup> He is unable to abstain from overindulgences and incapable of cautiousness when he overindulges. The excesses may be simple or complex, but are most always morally questionable. If the intemperance is private in nature there may be limited organizational consequences, but these overindulgences rarely stay private. When they become public, they also become distractions. “When the behavior is more egregious and enduring, as in substance abuse, it is destructive.”<sup>50</sup> Self-control can be viewed as a personal commitment to oneself. Thus a lack of self-control raises questions of morality. If the intemperate leader cannot uphold a personal commitment to himself, his followers realize that his commitment to them and the organization is of little value. The followers become distrustful, disillusioned and cynical, and the organization ceases to be productive.

#### THE ENFORCER LEADER

The enforcer leader is “subservient and often second-in-command.”<sup>51</sup> He follows his leader and implements the leader’s desires. If his leader is not a toxic leader, he will be a detail-oriented paper pusher, loyal to the boss, the organization, and the system.<sup>52</sup> However, if he does work for a toxic leader, he will become quite toxic himself. He wants the approval of his boss and cares only about that approval over that of any of the followers in the organization. The enforcer leader may never achieve the principal position in the organization, but he will be “instrumental to the success of others” and the others in question are more often than not toxic leaders.<sup>53</sup> A responsible, non-toxic superior will probably recognize the enforcer leader and

remove him from the organization. The enforcer leader's impact on an organization is doubly damaging because his behavior has enhanced and multiplied that of the primary toxic leader.

#### THE NARCISSISTIC LEADER

For the narcissistic leader "the world revolves on the axis of self"<sup>54</sup> and is "driven to succeed by a need for admiration and acclaim."<sup>55</sup> Although self-absorbed, he lacks self esteem. Although deeply ambitious, he feels inferior. Although he desires to be great, he is unable to take pleasure in his accomplishments because he wants more. His lack of self esteem, feelings of inferiority, and inability to value his own successes result in mistreatment, manipulation, and exploitation of others—all for the sake of his own self worth.<sup>56</sup> The narcissistic leader is so confident that he is the best and only one who can do the things he does, he is unable to recognize that others are capable of performing to his standard. He leaves his followers feeling inferior and doubtful of themselves. He leaves the organization longing for recognition.

#### THE CALLOUS LEADER

The callous leader is "uncaring and unkind and dismissive of others' needs, wants and wishes."<sup>57</sup> He lacks empathy or concern for his followers and has no desire to hear what they may have to say. Because of his lack of sensitivity to, and consideration for, his followers, he tends to be exceedingly harsh and inflexible. He is arrogant, patronizing, unpleasant, abrasive, selfish, and often hot-tempered. His demands are not only unrealistic, but delivered in a near abusive manner. Perhaps the most distasteful aspect of the callous leader is that at his core, he enjoys the reputation of being harsh and abusive. He takes pride and pleasure knowing that his followers fear and cower before him. His effect on his followers is a degraded self-image and diminished morale.

#### THE STREET FIGHTER LEADER

Perhaps alluring, the street fighter leader is egotistical, yet charming, and he maintains a "competitive vision of winning at all cost."<sup>58</sup> He is good to those who are loyal to him and can help him with his "wins," but he can be brutal to those who disagree with him or offer a dissenting opinion. He tends to build gangs of supporters and then uses the gangs to fight the battles that he feels he must win. Accordingly, if there are dissenters in the organization, they will be ostracized from the gang and duly punished. He will define himself by how much he wins and how big his empire grows. At the root of his egotism and competitive nature is his unyielding need to be the one in charge. This "unwavering need to be dominant produces power struggles when challenged."<sup>59</sup> The street fighter leader has a strong sense of

inadequacy and inferiority which drives him to prove himself to all of those who he sees as superior to him. Although the street fighter leader might be productive leader who achieves short term goals, it is at the cost of a cooperative and open organization where varying ideas can be exchanged. It is his “unwavering belief that he is right, and that support for him is right for the organization, that allows this toxic leader to attract and manipulate organizational gang members.”<sup>60</sup> Ultimately this can destroy the moral of the organization.

#### THE CORRUPT LEADER

Power and greed motivate the corrupt leader. He will lie, cheat, or steal to feed his need for power and money.<sup>61</sup> The lying usually feeds the need for power, while the cheating and stealing feed the need for money. It is clear to the followers that the corrupt leader will put his own needs and desires ahead of theirs. It is a matter of self-absorption similar to that of the narcissistic leader and reminiscent of the ignoring of the needs of others as characterized by the callous leader. The corrupt leader steps further into the immoral, unethical, and often illegal realm. Eventually the corrupt leader is found in a labyrinth of deceit. Whether it is for power or money, the corrupt leader cannot be trusted, and when subordinates and followers know this, the organization suffers.

#### THE INSULAR LEADER

While those in the inner circle of the insular leader may not suffer directly from his actions, there is a cost to others. The insular leader separates himself and his organization from everyone else and then utterly disregards the health and welfare of those not in his organization.<sup>62</sup> To the insular leader, “human rights in general are less important than the rights, and even the needs and wants” of his or his followers.<sup>63</sup> It might otherwise be commendable that the insular leader feels so strongly and will go to such lengths for his followers, but the cost is high to those outside of his following. Insular leadership may be observed primarily in the political arena where national boundaries are apparent and leaders may have a tendency to protect their own constituents above all else.

#### THE BULLY LEADER

The bully leader is pugnacious, bitter, intensely angry at the world and vehemently jealous of others who outperform him.<sup>64</sup> The bully leader has needs: to put others down, to invalidate others, and to devastate others. In addition to taking pleasure in his abusive behavior akin to that of the callous leader, for the bully leader “hurting others is the main goal.”<sup>65</sup> He will invalidate others in order to validate himself, and he will boast about his contributions whether

valid or not. He appears to be confident in himself and his abilities, but in reality he is terribly fearful that others will find out how incompetent he is. The bully leader is prone to ranting and outbursts, particularly when such actions may degrade and humiliate someone. In his mind, this makes him appear to be powerful and in charge. He will make threats and instill fear in others in order to establish an environment that gives him the advantage. If people fear him, he will have more control. However, the bully leader is secretly a coward and will back down when seriously challenged. He will then linger in anticipation of the right time to exact his revenge on the challenger.<sup>66</sup> The bully leader is mean, pure and simple, and the influence he has on an organization and his followers is nothing less than devastating. His goal is to hurt others, and he does exactly that. The positive side of the bully leader is that he will probably not last. His bitterness, anger and vindictiveness make it difficult for even close associates to continue their support.<sup>67</sup> Such leaders have a lasting effect on those they brutalize, even after departure.

#### THE EVIL LEADER

When the bully leader's brutality becomes physical to the point of committing atrocities he becomes the evil leader.<sup>68</sup> For the most part, the evil leader is found in the political arena in the form of an evil leader of a nation. While a study of toxic leadership certainly invites the question of the role of followers in creating and harboring the toxic leader, this is especially salient in the case of the evil leader. This "leader and at least some followers commit atrocities. They use pain as an instrument of power."<sup>69</sup> The evil leader must have evil followers to remain in a position of authority. There will also be "bystanders" who take on the role of followers. "The only way—the *only* way—such leaders can be stopped or at least slowed is by followers who are willing to take them on."<sup>70</sup> It will have to be the bystanders who gain strength in numbers, a collective power and are not a part of the evil followers, who must intervene.<sup>71</sup>

#### TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN THE U.S. ARMY

The question of how much toxic leadership exists in the U.S. Army is a question that demands a thorough examination. That examination can only be briefly addressed here and lacks the empirical, comprehensive review that the subject matter deserves. Certainly toxic leadership does exist in the Army. Based on a request from the Secretary of the Army, in 2003 Dr. Craig Bullis and Colonel George Reed of the U.S. Army War College (AWC) facilitated a project to study destructive leadership styles in the Army. The study included participation by twenty students who examined destructive leadership as part of an elective and interviews of an additional 36 students who provided input and opinions as part of focus groups. The students at the AWC are primarily military officers who have served for over twenty years and who are

selected as the future leaders of the profession of arms. These are top quality officers. Nearly all involved in the study had been the victim of some form of toxic leadership at some point in their careers. It follows that if this many people at this level in their military careers have experienced toxic leadership, then this is a wider-ranging matter than a few bad seeds. The study surmised that “toxic leaders are still all-too-familiar to members of the Armed Forces.”<sup>72</sup> However, the system is still in the dark. Only those who have experienced it or have studied it specifically are aware of it, which is why it warrants further study.

It seems that when most people experience toxic leadership in the military, they assume that their situation is an anomaly. They assume that their toxic leader is just one person in the thousands who slipped through the cracks and made it to a leadership position without the qualifying skill set to be a leader. They assume that the Army generally grows and promotes good, conscientious, trustworthy leaders, and that if a bad one slithers through, it is without question, outside of the norm. They assume it is their bad fortune to cross paths with this irregular abnormality. They are wrong. Although it would not be correct to assume that toxic leadership is running rampant in the ranks, it is unquestionably more prevalent than just a few bad seeds.

#### WHY DOES TOXIC LEADERSHIP HAPPEN IN THE U.S. ARMY?

The investigation into toxic leadership in the military should include a close look at why it exists and why it appears to be so prevalent in the military. The simple answer is that toxic leadership reflects an aspect of human nature. As discussed earlier, humans fall victim to a series of hierarchical needs. Recall that Maslow points out the needs at the lowest levels must be met before advancing to the next level. Unfortunately, some humans struggle with getting these needs met. They get delayed at a certain level of development and are never able to move on. If this is at level two, the level of *safety*, or level three, *love and belonging*, the result may be low or no self-esteem. Nearly every type of toxic leadership previously defined has self-esteem concerns as its root. Some of these people make it into the Army and into leadership positions.

Another reason may be the inherent paradoxical nature of military leadership. A review of some of the toxic leadership types reflect some desired qualities of military leadership. Unlike some of the milder traits and types, such as incompetence, malfunctioning, inadequacy, and absentee, many of the more severe traits and types, such as busy, rigid, in control, enforcing, confident, and street fighter, may be characteristics the Army values in a leader. It is the extent to which these characteristics are applied that represents a problem. In moderation these

features may be seen as good and acceptable. In the extreme they are toxic. For the most part, these toxic military leaders tend to do little in moderation and do most everything in the extreme. This is not a case where if a little of something is good, more must be better.

Inadequate development is another cause of toxic leadership. Mentoring is a critical aspect of Army leadership. Officers are taught at an early age to find leaders to emulate. Junior officers are advised to observe and emulate older, senior, successful officers to determine what they have done to be successful. If there were no existing toxic leaders, there would be none to emulate. However, since there are toxic leaders, it is inevitable that toxic leadership will be replicated. It will continue to propagate because it is seen by some as a pathway to success.

#### WHY IS TOXIC LEADERSHIP TOLERATED IN THE U.S. ARMY?

Let us now address the difficult question of why toxic leadership is tolerated, if not promoted in the U.S. Army. Perhaps the most obvious reason, albeit disturbing, is that toxic leaders seem to get the job done, at least in the short-term. I submit that whether it is because of their superiors or because of their followers, it is always in spite of their toxicity. At the low-end of the toxicity spectrum: absentee, incompetent, and codependent leaders, the toxic leader's followers will carry him through. They have to. That is what military people do. However, at this end of the scale, the toxic behavior is probably not as tolerated by superiors because these are not traits the Army values in a leader. These leaders may continue to succeed, but not as much as the more toxic leaders. The harsher toxic leaders who bear traits the Army values, such as rigid, controlling, enforcing, and confident, but take them to the extreme will find more success. Their superiors are either oblivious to the toxic behavior or, more likely, are so satisfied with the results in terms of mission accomplishment that they choose to overlook the human cost of getting the job done.

#### WHAT EFFECT DOES POSITIVE LEADERSHIP HAVE?

If toxic leadership can be identified, can it then be cured? If superiors and senior leaders take appropriate action, perhaps they can mitigate the negative effects of toxic leadership. The appropriate action on the part of the superiors is good leadership itself. Leading, mentoring, training and educating in a responsible, honest, non-toxic manner may be the best way to combat this phenomenon of toxic leadership within the U.S. Army. Perhaps if toxic leadership is not rewarded by the system, the superiors and the Army, then perhaps it will cease to be so prevalent. With that point made, good leadership certainly exists in the Army, but it is difficult for it to have a positive impact on toxic leadership due to lack of knowledge and understanding. If

the Army system is not aware, the leadership is not either. Thus, further research and then education is the first necessary step for good leadership to have a positive impact.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Toxic leadership exists in the U.S. Army, and the Army seems to tolerate it. While it is unlikely that toxic leadership can be eliminated, better identification and further study on the part of the Army could very well reduce its persistence and temper its negative effects. As revealed in this paper, there are a number of personal characteristics and types of toxic leaders. All of them can be found in the ranks to varying degrees. Identification in the early part of a leader's career is a good first step toward decreasing the possibility of continuing or worsening toxic behavior. This identification and recognition is critical and can only be accomplished through further study and education of superiors as to the need to recognize it and take appropriate action. The appropriate action on the part of the superiors is good leadership itself.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jean Lipman-Blumen, *Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, September 2004), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Lynn Whicker, *Toxic Leaders* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1996), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Lipman-Blumen, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Whicker, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Lipman-Blumen, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Whicker, 62.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

<sup>11</sup> Lipman-Blumen, 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Whicker, 55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Lipman-Blumen, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Whicker, 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.



<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>26</sup> Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: The Paradox of Personal Dysfunction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, November 1997), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Whicker, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters* (loc: Harvard Business School Publishing, September 2004), 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> McIntosh and Rima, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>37</sup> Whicker, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> McIntosh and Rima, 108.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Kellerman, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Whicker, 99.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>46</sup> McIntosh and Rima, 88.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>49</sup> Kellerman, 95.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>51</sup> Whicker, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>54</sup> McIntosh and Rima, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>57</sup> Kellerman, 142.

<sup>58</sup> Whicker, 129.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>61</sup> Kellerman, 44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Whicker, 145.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>68</sup> Kellerman, 191.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 216

<sup>72</sup> Craig Bullis and George Reed, "Assessing Leaders to Establish and Maintain Positive Command Climate" (A Report to the Secretary of the Army, February 2003) 68.



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