

# TOXIC LEADERSHIP

What

Are

We

Talking

About?

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**T**he American Army is, of necessity, a hierarchical bureaucracy. Disciplined response to authority remains a bedrock value. Ten years of complex operations conducted typically with notable professionalism by a true volunteer force must be unique in history. And that noteworthy effort followed decades of erratic funding and potentially traumatic alterations of structure.

Our Army is also a remarkably introspective institution. Studies of leadership and command climates abound. Since “good leadership” is commonplace, headlines about “toxic leaders” should (and do) draw attention. Recent military journals provided sad details of conspicuous relief of Army and Navy commanders. The reason for concern about any toxic leaders, particularly in our senior ranks, is apparent: Talented people in the 21st century expect to work in healthy climates, where strong bonds of

mutual trust facilitate mission accomplishment and support long-term institutional strength. Toxic leaders corrupt healthy climates. Indeed, their very presence, even in small numbers, undermines confidence in the institution's commitment to high standards of leadership.

### Defining 'Toxic Leader'

Defining *toxic leader* is the first priority before addressing numbers, impact, cause and solution. Webster's defines *toxic* as *poisonous*, not far from *destructive* or *harmful*. Naturally, the definition varies with the culture: Some routine styles of command aboard the HMS *Bounty* would not be tolerated today. Soldiers today have suitably high expectations about the kind of leader behavior we have identified as doctrine.

In response to a Secretary of the Army tasking in 2003, U.S. Army War College faculty and students stated that toxic leaders "are focused on visible short-term mission accomplishment ... provide superiors with impressive, articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions ... [but] are unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate ... [and] are seen by the majority of subordinates as arrogant, self-serving, inflexible, and petty." This definition reminds us that not all elements of a toxic personality are independently destructive. We prize "articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions." The phrase in the 2003 definition, "are seen by the majority of subordinates," is significant. In determining leader toxicity, group consensus is powerful.

The U.S. Army War College study, "Leadership Lessons at Division Command Level-2010: A Review of Division Commander Leader Behaviors and Organizational Climates in Selected Army Divisions after Nine Years of War," surveyed and interviewed 183 officers from four divisions just returning from deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. The study summarized officer views of toxic leaders as "self-serving, arrogant, volatile, and opinionated to the point of being organizationally dysfunctional ... very persuasive, responsive, and accommodating to their seniors." In those interviews, the report continued, "it seemed clear that officers were not describing the 'tough but fair,' or even the 'over-supervisor,' or the 'not really good with people,' or even the 'rarely takes tactical initiative.'" These officers' perceptions make a discernible, important distinction between *tough* and *toxic*. An assessment of a leader as inferior or

even unsatisfactory based on decision-making inadequacies, clumsy interpersonal skills or lack of drive did not automatically label him as toxic. It is also possible to "make tough, sound decisions on time," "see the big picture [and] provide context and perspective," and "get out of the headquarters and visit the troops"—the top behaviors of a highly regarded senior leader as reported in a 2004 division commander study—and still be conspicuously toxic as judged by a majority of subordinates. In other words, while all toxic officers are ultimately poor leaders, not all poor leaders are toxic. The forthcoming version of Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership* notes, "Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization and mission performance." A recent study on ethical behavior by the Army Center of Excellence for the Professional Military Ethic, "ACPME Technical Report 2010-01: MNF-I Excellence in Character and Ethical Leadership (EXCEL) Study," stated, "The Army should develop leaders who understand the line between being firm ... and being abusive; and identify and separate those found to be abusive." *Identify* and *separate* are the important words.

A proposed definition: Toxic leaders are individuals whose behavior appears driven by self-centered careerism at the expense of their subordinates and unit, and whose style is characterized by abusive and dictatorial behavior that promotes an unhealthy organizational climate. Other observations about toxic leaders from surveys, interviews and literature—most derived from research and discussions about senior leaders or managers—are:

- They rarely take blame or share glory.
- They are not toxic all the time, or to all people.
- They are rarely if ever toxic when in the company of "the boss."
- They sometimes have good ideas and accomplish good things.
- They can be charming when the occasion fits.
- They are frequently described as extremely bright and hard-working.
- They often have a coterie of devoted "fans" who keep appearing on their staffs.
- Most have been seen as toxic by subordinates since early in their career.
- Their boss either does not know or pretends not to know, and almost never records, their abuse of subordinates.

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### Numbers of Toxic Leaders

Because there is no standard definition of *toxic*, because perceptions about a superior's behavior are subjective, because our Army culture puts loyalty to the leader and ability to absorb hardship of all kinds high on the attribute list, and because a degree of harshness has characterized some highly regarded officers, estimates of the numbers of toxic leaders are just that—estimates. The data become less subjective, however, when we can assess also the impact of toxic leadership on the climate of the organization.

The best current reference on the toxic leader issue is the Center for Army Leadership (CAL) "Technical Report 2011-3," which garnered some national press recently. Estimates of toxic leaders in that study, which assessed both noncommissioned and commissioned officers, ranged into the 20 percent level. That very high number might have resulted in part from a broad interpretation by respondents of a toxic leader, although study members took efforts to ensure that toxicity was differentiated from simply poor leadership. A recent survey at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, however, found a figure of nearly 18 percent. Whatever the numbers are today, the sense of the officer corps is that there are undoubtedly toxic leaders among us with the possibility that their numbers are decreasing somewhat from some undetermined past date.

One slice of information on percentages of perceived toxic leaders among colonels and general officers—the level constituting the greatest potential danger to operational effectiveness and retention of high-quality people—comes from informal surveys of some students at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and the Army War College over a period of 15 years. (See the chart on the next page.) These data describing colonels and generals are derived from inputs from successful student officers who had been treated well by the institution.

The percentages of senior leaders perceived by their subordinates to be outstanding/transformational (30–50 percent) would be viewed as remarkably high in any organization. Those figures are a tribute to persistent Army efforts to develop and select good leaders. The "toxic" numbers, however, are also remarkable. They deserve an institutional response. A mission command culture could be strangled by this percentage of toxic senior leaders in the force. A very good soldier and scientist, LTC Larry Ingraham, now deceased, commented on the dramatic differences among subordinate reputations of senior officers, saying that the personnel system that cannot distinguish between the revered and the despised must have a fundamental flaw.

### **Why Toxic Leaders Survive in Our Culture**

Military environments are fertile ground for both growing outstanding leaders and tolerating tyrants. As a culture we value cooperation, loyalty and respect for authority. We honor a "can-do" attitude. We build unit pride and are uncomfortable with malcontents. We rightly prize mission accomplishment. As long as the mission is relatively short-term, before a destructive climate raises its ugly head, the toxic can-do personality can prosper. Subordinates are reluctant to identify their boss as toxic. They feel a loyalty and do not want to embarrass their unit. They want to "survive" themselves and not be written off as troublemakers. In addition, it takes a very strong and perceptive boss to identify a subordinate as toxic and take action. Most actions to relieve a toxic leader were set in motion only after a public spectacle forced an investigation that uncovered toxic leadership as a root cause.

Considerable work has been done in the social, behavioral and cognitive sciences on toxic or destructive leaders. An article in the June 2007 issue of *The Leadership Quarterly*, "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers, and Conducive Environments," provides an excellent summary, stating, "Three components of charisma apply to destructive leaders: vision, self-presentational skills, and personal energy." It is interesting to see how closely these descriptions apply to current Army officers. The referenced paper explains the role of the narcissistic personality whose "sense of entitlement often leads to self-serving abuses of power." The fact that toxic behavior is typically linked to a substantially compromised personality does not augur well for on-the-job remediation or development as an institutional solution.

Although alerted for years to the issue, as an institution we have been reluctant to confront it directly. We have put faith in incremental adjustments to education, training and development systems. There has been little urgency to act systematically. The rarely conspicuous cases were handled individually with apparently rare exploration of underlying cultural issues. This was partly because our institution has performed well overall, because of our often "if it ain't broke don't fix it" mentality, and because the senior leader time and energy needed to fix complex internal systems were understandably captured by immediate crises that demanded their attention. Our institution is by no means broken, but it deserves some refurbishing.

There are lingering doubts within the Army about implementing remedial programs that would give subordinates any formal voice in the personnel management process. The predominant fear is of an eventual weakening of the chain of command. There are understandable suspicions also that many reports of toxic leadership are from dissatisfied subordinates who failed to meet the legitimate expectations of demanding bosses. That contention is not supported by recent studies but could provide a rationale for avoiding the unpleasant business of digging into complex personnel systems. The toxic leader phenomenon is a slowly growing organizational cancer that can be tolerated by resilient people for a long time before causing sharp institutional pain.

### **Solution Concepts**

We are correctly cautious in adopting practices that have even a remote possibility of compromising command authority. Even admitting there are toxic leaders in our midst is problematic for a few officers. For the vast majority of officers a pretension that there are none seems patently dishonest. In any case, staying on the current path has no rational hope for solving the problem. Meanwhile, tolerance for toxic leaders among current members of the force is conspicuously low. Perceived institutional nonchalance about the situation is a serious contradiction of espoused Army values. The desired mission command culture depends heavily on an environment of mutual trust that only high-quality leaders can produce.

Two of the categories used in data collected from selected CGSC and War College student samples during 1996–2010	Estimates in population
<i>Essentially transformational:</i> Inspirational, encouraging, puts mission and troops first; coaches, builds teams and a healthy climate; sets high standards for self and others; generates and reciprocates trust.	<b>30–50 percent</b>
<i>Essentially toxic:</i> Alienates and abuses subordinates; creates a hostile climate; often rules by fear; rejects bad news; seen as self-serving and arrogant; is skillful in upward relationships; usually bright, energetic and technically competent.	<b>8–10 percent</b>

Various ongoing initiatives must be integrated into a comprehensive program in which education of the officer corps on objectives, concepts and details of these initiatives would play a major role. As the CAL 2011 report states, “This problem must be attacked simultaneously at several levels.” A near-term goal is precluding toxic leaders from getting into the pool of colonels who are general officer candidates—a practice that if carefully explained and fairly implemented could by itself rejuvenate faith in Army promotion and selection systems and reinforce important Army values by practicing what we preach. Such initiatives include the following.

*Institute a system for regularly reporting the results of command climate surveys.* This effort should parallel systems for reporting other elements of the readiness system, with Army-wide collection of periodic data. Battalion-size units and staffs at division level and higher should be the primary targets for standardized climate assessments.

Climate assessments have been around longer than the 360 process and remain an important tool for commanders. They have never been collected Army-wide with the same comprehensive regularity as materiel and training readiness reports, although we emphasize that troop morale is a vital ingredient in combat power.

Climate surveys can be designed for user convenience, are a method of reinforcing Army values and can provide advance warning of toxic leadership. (Determination of who has access to climate data and the levels of consolidation and review of reports are issues requiring careful attention.)

*Provide selection boards with supplemental information from subordinates.* This will enhance the validity of the top-down information now available and is the heart of any serious attempt to rid the institution of the toxic leader. Exclusively top-down assessments have failed to eliminate toxic leaders from hierarchical organizations, even those with generally solid reputations such as the U.S. Army.

The 2010 Division Commander Study recommends: “Revisit significantly the process for selection to O-6 command to ensure that there are no future candidates for Division Command who have been identified clearly as toxic leaders. Specifically, provide boards selecting brigade-level

commanders with supplemental data summarizing leadership behavior assessments taken from a sample of officers who had served as company commanders or principal staff offices when the individuals being considered were their battalion commanders.” The description of a proposed pilot study of this procedure explains that the assessments of subordinates are taken usually one to three years after the candidate for O-6 command has departed the previous battalion-level command. (This is not use of a 360 “feedback” process. That process, designed for enhanced self-awareness and continuing growth as a leader, is used only for that purpose. It must be maintained absolutely separate from any subordinate input designed and denoted as part of the promotion, selection or assignment process.)

Given the limitations of the current database on officer performance, there may not be opportunities for the personnel management process to reliably and systematically identify the toxic leader earlier than selection for O-6 assignments. A carefully designed and closely monitored pilot program (over several years), however, may uncover possibilities for earlier intervention and would in itself indicate the Army’s commitment to confront the problem.

*Establish a general officer steering committee.* This will report to the Chief of Staff, perhaps led by the commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, to coordinate, guide and oversee the implementation of systems modifications and innovations necessary to address comprehensively the toxic leader issue while simultaneously enhancing the quality of command climates.

*Do not spend additional resources on further external studies.* All the necessary experience and expertise are available within Army agencies. The key is to coordinate and integrate ongoing efforts into a comprehensive program in which education of the officer corps on the toxic leader issue should play a conspicuous role.

In light of the current commitment and attention of Army senior leaders, the urgency of creating supportive climates that will motivate and retain high-quality people, and the recognition that viable solutions for solving the problem and strengthening the institution are at hand, the time seems ripe for action. ★