Toxic Leadership

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IN 2003, Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White asked the U.S. Army War College (AWC) to address how the Army could effectively assess leaders to detect those who might have "destructive leadership styles."[1] The most important first step in detecting and treating toxic leadership is to recognize the symptoms.

The terms toxic leader, toxic manager, toxic culture, and toxic organization appear with increasing frequency in business, leadership, and management literature. Analyst Gillian Flynn provides a particularly descriptive definition of a toxic manager; he is the "manager who bullies, threatens, yells. The manager whose mood swings determine the climate of the office on any given workday. Who forces employees to whisper in sympathy in cubicles and hallways. The backbiting, belittling boss from hell. Call it what you want—poor interpersonal skills, unfortunate office practices—but some people, by sheer shameful force of their personalities make working for them rotten."[2]

In Kathy Simmons's "Executive Update Online," Rob Rosner describes a toxic atmosphere: "It's all about ends [but] nothing is said about means. It's about when bosses only know how to use the stick and there is nary a carrot in sight. And finally, it's in the pain that is in the faces of all the people who work there."[3] Writer Marcia Whicker describes toxic leaders as "maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent, even malicious. They succeed by tearing others down. They glory in turf protection, fighting and controlling rather than uplifting followers."[4]

In 2003, 20 AWC students focused on the topic of command climate and leaders' roles in shaping it. The students provided a well-considered description of toxic leaders: "Destructive leaders are focused on visible short-term mission accomplishment. They provide superiors with impressive, articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions. But, they are unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate. They are seen by the majority of subordinates as arrogant, self-serving, inflexible, and petty."[5]

A loud, decisive, demanding leader is not necessarily toxic. A leader with a soft voice and façade of sincerity can also be toxic. In the end, it is not one specific behavior that deems one toxic; it is the cumulative effect of demotivational behavior on unit morale and climate over time that tells the tale. Toxic leaders might be highly competent and effective in a short-sighted sense, but they contribute to an unhealthy command climate with ramifications extending far beyond their tenure. Three key elements of the toxic leader syndrome are—

1. An apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates.

2. A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate.

3. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest.

In his best-selling book *Band of Brothers,* Stephen E. Ambrose provides an example of a toxic leader—the detested commander of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment.[6] Ambrose writes, "Anyone who has ever been in the Army knows the type. [He] was the classic chickenshit. He generated maximum anxiety over minimum significance." He had poor judgment, but his style was what generated resentment. He "could not see the

Toxic leadership
is often perplexing
to subordinates
and strains
communications.
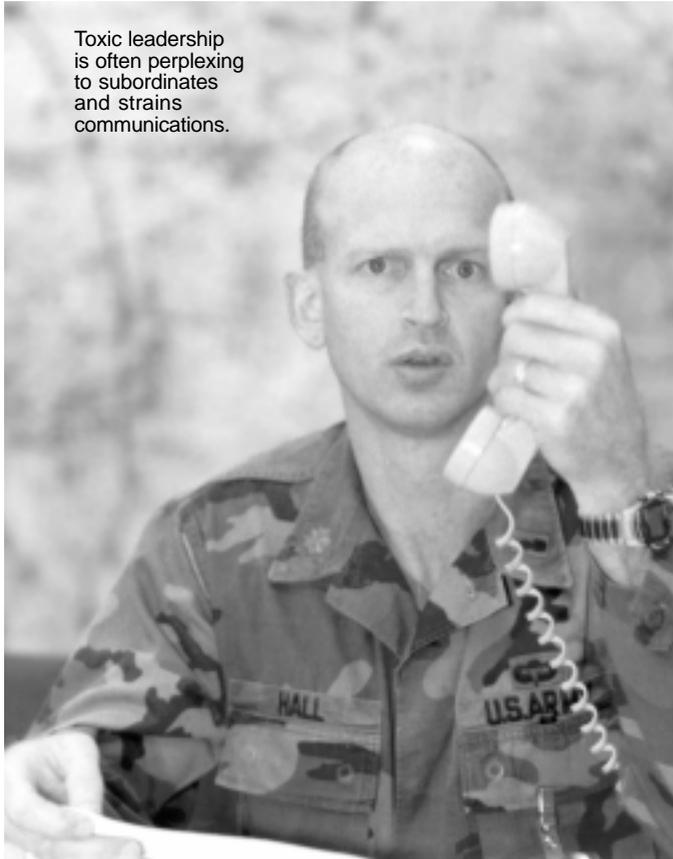
Tyler Wirken

unrest and the contempt that was breeding in the troops. You led by fear or you led by example. We were being led by fear."[7] Superiors took no action and, characteristically, no soldier officially complained to the chain of command, but the soldiers considered taking matters into their own hands and discussed shooting him when the company got into combat.[8] Things did not go that far because the commander left the unit before Easy Company engaged in combat operations.

Unfortunately, toxic leaders are still all-too-familiar to members of the Armed Forces. Virtually every AWC student participating in the project could speak about serving under toxic leaders. Such accounts are often accompanied by a sense of incredulity when toxic leaders are advanced to positions of increasing responsibility. One officer said, "We have got to do something as a moral imperative to identify those guys and stop them from going forward. The higher they are in the system, the more damage they do."[9] The same study participant spoke of the reaction when a toxic leader appeared on a widely publicized promotion list: "We all know anecdotally the cries when the list is published. 'Oh my God, how could they have possibly done that to my Army? What was wrong with them? What were they thinking?'"[10]

To suffering subordinates, toxic leaders represent a daily challenge that can result in unnecessary organizational stress, negative values, and hopelessness. Toxic leaders are anathema to the health of units. They can be quite responsive to missions from higher headquarters and obsequious to peers and especially to superiors, but their deficiencies are evident to subordinates. Toxic leaders rise to their stations in life over the carcasses of those who work for them. They run their units into the ground, casting a wake that is obvious to those who assume leadership positions behind them. Soldiers serving under toxic leaders can become disenchanted with the Army or, worse, might take the successful toxic leader as an example to emulate.

Toxic leaders do not add value to the organizations they lead, even if the unit performs successfully on their watch. They do not engender high levels of confidence that lead to unit cohesion and esprit de corps. Why, we ask, does an organization so obviously people-oriented and that places such emphasis on leadership tolerate them? Field Manual 3-0, *Operations,* gives an example of the Army's doctrinal emphasis on leadership: "The role of the leader is central to all Army operations [and] trust is a key attribute in the human dimension of combat leadership. Soldiers must trust and have confidence in their leaders. Once trust is violated, a leader becomes ineffective."[11]

Perhaps there is something about military culture combined with various personnel policies that contributes to suffering such leaders in silence. After all, soldiers want to be proud of their units, and the Army value of loyalty militates against airing dirty laundry. Subordinates might not report toxic leaders because nobody likes a whiner. We expect professionals to perform to the best of their ability despite a supervisor's leadership style. The Army inculcates an attitude that one must respect the rank, even if one does not respect the person. Military culture esteems technical competence, and technical competence will lead some senior leaders to overlook flawed toxic leaders.

Frequent assignment changes resulting from current personnel policies might encourage some to attempt to wait out toxic leaders. In an individual-replacement system, leaders and soldiers tend to

move frequently so there is always light at the end of the proverbial tunnel; it is only a matter of time before the suffering soldier or the toxic leader leaves. Escaping toxic leaders might not continue in this manner, however. The Army is considering plans for unit rotation, which would not provide the escape route that individual replacement provides.

Unmasking Toxic Leaders

Most study participants accepted the fact that raters can be fooled by toxic leaders. One study participant said, "We have a system that is totally supervisor-centric in terms of incentives, rewards, and punishments. The only person whose opinion counts is the person who writes the OER [officer evaluation report]."[12] Another said, "What we don't know is what the subordinates and peers think. I would submit to you, and most would agree, that people we have worked for who are toxic leaders—the subordinates know and the superiors do not. The challenge is to get that input."[13] A strong message from the study group was that it is time for an expanded evaluation process that considers input from peers and subordinates as well as superiors.

Past Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Creative Leadership, Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., makes an important distinction between subordinate evaluation of supervisors and a process where subordinates are asked to describe their boss.[14] Not all subordinates are necessarily competent to evaluate their boss, but they can relate whether they are being tormented by leaders who are inflexible, disrespectful, seek personal gain above shared gain, act unethically, or rely heavily on fear and intimidation. Subordinates might not have the perspective necessary to evaluate the whole person, but they are certainly in a position to comment on certain important leadership behaviors and whether they trust and respect their leaders.

Many in the study group were concerned about how a multirater or 360-degree evaluation program would be implemented.[15] Some were concerned about leaders pandering to subordinates or leaders not being forceful or demanding. Others felt that soldiers are fully capable of distinguishing between the leader who sets and enforces high standards from the abusive and petty toxic leader: "Soldiers want competent leaders. You want somebody who can take charge and get the job done even if he is a little rough sometimes. You are going to favor that guy over somebody who wants to hold your hand and pat you on the back all of the time. Troops know the difference."[16]

Because senior officers serve as powerful role models and because changing evaluation systems is expensive, study participants agreed that any change should be implemented from the top down. Multirater evaluation should begin with the evaluations of general officers and proceed down to field and company grades. A representative comment was, "Senior leaders can't focus this effort as a trial effort at the lower levels to see how it works out; it has to happen from the top down. If you make the general officer community feel this thing, then work it down—it will take hold."[17] Accepting the concept as a multirater evaluation tool is such a significant cultural change that some recommended its use as a developmental tool for a period of years before using it in the performance-evaluation process.

Study participants also noted that unit-climate assessment tools, such as the surveys the Defense Equal Opportunity (EO) Management Institute and the Army Research Institute conduct, are useful and could be helpful in identifying toxic leaders. In "Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance," a *Harvard Business Review* article, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatis, and Annie McKee agree: "An alarming number of leaders do not really know if they have resonance with their organizations. Rather, they suffer from the CEO disease; its one unpleasant symptom is the sufferer's near-total ignorance about how his mood and actions appear to the organization. It's not that leaders don't care how they are perceived; most do. But they incorrectly assume that they can decipher this information themselves. Worse, they think that if they are having a negative effect, someone will tell them. They're wrong."[18]

AWC study participants suggested that existing climate-assessment surveys could be improved in terms of survey content, administration, and interpretation. One participant said, "I am skeptical of many of the surveys based on when they are given, how they are given, and the questions that are asked."[19]

Some participants called for climate data elements designed specifically to flag a toxic leadership problem: "The people I dealt with were not capable of designing a survey to get at the questions I wanted answered. They were the EO folks, but this is bigger than EO. That's an important business, but there are other aspects that need to be addressed. [Y]our instrument must be targeted to the leader as well. You could discern resource mismatch versus a Myers-Briggs type 'JERK.'"[20] The study participant astutely noted that although leadership is an im-

portant variable in determining command climate, other variables, such as lack of resources for assigned missions, also play a part.

Climate-assessment surveys are tools for commanders to use to assess their own units. Considerable skepticism exists that toxic leaders would take appropriate corrective action unless results are provided to raters. A study participant gave an example of a toxic leader's failure to change in response to a survey: "This guy was insane. Every one of those forms was used to the nth degree. Every squadron nailed this guy over and over again and not a damned thing was done about it. Those surveys don't go to the Army, they go to the commander. We have to change the system."[21]

Study participants doubted whether the Army is willing to identify and deal with toxic leaders if they are otherwise effective, at least in the short-term. One study participant said, "These people stay on, not because they are a toxic leader, but because they get results."[22] Another said, "The Army leadership has seen some toxic leaders—what have they done about it? I would be amazed if there is any recourse."[23] One comment directly addressed the issue: "You are going to have guys who see a destructive leader and act on it. You will see others that don't. The ones that don't, typically don't because they like the results."[24] Such comments were usually voiced with an observable sense of regret and resignation.

Imagining the deleterious and possibly intangible effects of toxic leaders is not hard. The actual effect on the military in a quantitative sense is not known. In his study of a failed leadership and command climate that resulted in a fatal B-52 crash at Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, in 1994, Major Anthony Kern sagely notes, "When leadership fails and command climate breaks down, tragic things can happen."[25]

As recent accounts from Iraq and Afghanistan attest, no shortage of great leaders exists in the military. Army leadership doctrine is sound and, if followed, will help eliminate toxic leaders. Conscientious men and women do get promoted by the same system that permits toxic leaders to slip through. What we must ask is, to what extent do variables, such as promotion and command selection systems, military education, performance metrics, personality type, and organizational culture, permit the existence of toxic leaders who seem to prosper, and what are we willing to do to solve the problem?

One might hypothesize that a relationship exists between toxic leadership and the disinclination to reenlist. Exit interviews of departing soldiers might help provide answers to questions like, "Have you considered leaving the Army because of your supervisor's leadership style?"

Perhaps the effect of toxic leadership is insignificant and a large-scale institutional response is not appropriate. Perhaps the process of merely identifying the phenomenon with a name and suggesting its undesirability is sufficient to reduce the practice. On the other hand, toxic leadership might be a large enough problem that changes to the personnel system specifically designed to identify and eliminate toxic leaders could be a real boon to retention efforts and unit effectiveness. Redefining successful leadership in the development, assessment, and selection process would be helpful. We will not know unless we ask the questions and search for the answers. Such a research agenda would seem to be easily justified in an all-recruited force seeking to move to a unit-based rotation system.

If we determine that toxic leadership exists at a higher level than we are willing to tolerate and that such leaders can be identified by using tools like multirater leader assessments or climate assessments, the next question is, "What should we do to improve?" Simmons suggests that the solution starts from the top with an executive team oriented to a healthy culture willing to take action to achieve it.[26] When explaining why such action does not happen more often, Lynne F. McClure, author of *Risky Business: Managing Violence in the Workplace*, says, "The biggest single reason is because [the behavior is] tolerated."[27] McClure, an expert on managing high-risk behaviors, believes if a company has toxic managers, it is because the culture enables it—knowingly or unknowingly—through nothing more than apathy.

Respect

One of the Army values is respect. By definition, the toxic leader demonstrates a lack of respect to subordinates. The historically wide band of tolerance for leadership style should therefore be narrowed to exclude toxic leaders. Relief for cause and poor evaluations for toxic leadership can be powerful cultural statements. Doing so would require expanding the definition of success beyond short-term metrics to include the health of the organization and the understanding that unit climate matters because service members and civilians are more than just means to an end. In such a culture, those who do not foster a positive command climate will not be successful.

Identifying and purging toxic leaders is only part of the solution. Every supervisor should be on the lookout for toxic behavior in subordinates and to coach and develop them accordingly: "The only thing a bully respects is authority from above. Thus, the only way to get help in dealing with a difficult manager is to appeal to someone in a higher position who can intervene."[28]

Toxic leaders will rationalize their behavior as necessary to get the job done, or as part of the time-honored command technique of coming into the unit hard because it is easier to ease off than to tighten up. Flynn recommends that supervisors use confrontation: "Be as specific as you can. Don't couch matters in vague terms, like saying the manager has 'interpersonal issues.' If the manager is perceived as a bully, say that. If she tends to explode at employees, tell her that. Then explain [that] it must be stopped and why."[29] If the behavior does not change, there are many administrative remedies available.

Toxic leadership, like leadership in general, is more easily described than defined, but terms like self-aggrandizing, petty, abusive, indifferent to unit climate, and interpersonally malicious seem to capture the concept. A toxic leader is poison to the unit—an insidious, slow-acting poison that complicates diagnosis and the application of an antidote. Large and complex organizations like the military should look for the phenomenon since culture and organizational policies might inadvertently combine to perpetuate it.

Superiors are in particularly important positions to deal with toxic behavior because they have the authority to counter it. Yet, they might be the last to observe the behavior unless they are attuned. Subordinates are generally not in a position to address the problem because toxic leaders are characteristically unconcerned about subordinates. Still, toxic leaders need not be tolerated. Enough hard-driving, high-achieving, compassionate leaders who understand the importance of good climate exist in the Armed Forces to belie the myth that rule by fear and intimidation is necessary. ***MR***

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Toxic leadership often stupifies.

NOTES

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3. Rob Rosner in Kathy Simmons, "Sticks and Stones," Executive Update Online, on-line at <www.gwsae.org/ExecutiveUpdate/ September/sticks.htm>, accessed 4 December 2003.
4. Marcia Lynn Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 11.
5. Bullis and Reed, 2.
6. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 15.
7. Dick Winters in Ambrose, 17.
8. Ambrose, 33.
9. Bullis and Reed, 33.
10. Ibid.
11. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0: *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 1-18, 4-8.
12. Bullis and Reed, 12.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. LTG Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., E-mail message to author, 27 December 2003.
15. Schemes that accept input from superiors, peers, and subordinates are known as 360-degree evaluation schemes.
16. Bullis and Reed, 18.
17. Ibid., 16, 17.
18. Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatis, and Annie McKee, "Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2001): 47.
19. Bullis and Reed, 13.
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21. Ibid., 46.
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25. MAJ Anthony Kern "Darker Shades of Blue: A Case Study of Failed Leadership," 1995, on-line at <http://users2.ev1.net/~ neilkrey/crmdevel/resources/paper/darkblue/darkblue.htm>, accessed 26 December 2003.
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28. Krista Henly, "Detoxifying a Toxic Leader," *Innovative Leader* (June 2003): 6.
29. Flynn.

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