



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Toxic leadership

A call for change

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Over my 18 years in the Army, I have suffered the effects of toxic leadership and have learnt of peers who had similar experiences. This has led me to realise the complex nature of toxic leadership and its impact on individuals, units, and the entire organisation.

This Insight is based on my extensive work on the subject. It offers a personal account and an examination of the key theoretical issues. It concludes with suggestions about how to ensure that toxic leadership is eradicated from the Army.

A personal experience

As a Lance Corporal, I worked for a leader that showed signs of toxic leadership. Although I delivered well above the workload of my peers, the leader would criticise me harshly, was unnecessarily rude, and often took credit for my output with their own superiors. They were unapproachable, and no one would want to go to their office due to the way in which they would behave towards people: overcritical, harsh, rude or dismissive. The entire unit felt like the team's ethos was lost; there was an overpowering sense of worthlessness. The negative environment soon started to affect each individual's mental health. There was a growing feeling of being trapped. Personally, I felt that working with them ran me down, caused anxiety, and made me insecure. It came to the point that some of us even questioned our future in the Army.

What could we do? It was clear that it was not possible to open a constructive discussion directly with our leader. We did not feel safe to do so and knew instinctively that they would not accept criticism. To find a solution, I spoke with colleagues who had previously worked with the same leader: they confirmed that they had always displayed toxic leadership traits. At the time, the team had concluded that it was impossible to achieve any change and accepted the leader's damaging behaviour. In my quest to find help, I sought the advice of higher command, but again I was advised to accept the situation and was even told that the toxic style was in fact a sign that my leader "is just trying to develop you". According to this view, the excessive amount of work and harsh criticism I received were a way to help me grow professionally and personally. No one was willing to listen. No one was able to help. Looking back at those years, I see that at such a young age we should have felt safe and cared for. We should have had proper channels to report serious concerns and should have been reassured that our superiors would listen and would help. Instead, we were left alone. An individual of rank used their authority to control vulnerable people; the surrounding ranks knew what was happening and failed to act.

What is Toxic Leadership?

According to the Army Leadership Doctrine, "toxic leadership is a combination of selfish attitudes, motivations, and behaviours that have adverse effects on both subordinates and the organisation". In this context, the toxic leader usually "lacks emotional intelligence and has little concern for others, acting only in self-interest". They tend to "employ dysfunctional behaviours to deceive, intimidate and coerce people to work for them" (ALD, 2016).¹

The definition provided by the US Army's is similar although it uses the term "counterproductive leadership" rather than toxic. According to this definition, toxic leadership behaviours "prevent establishing a positive organizational climate and interfere with mission accomplishment, especially in highly complex operational settings. Prolonged use of counterproductive leadership destroys unit morale, trust, and undermines the followers' commitment to the mission". Over time, it "can also decrease task performance, physical and psychological well-being, and increase negative outcomes such as depression or burnout." (US Army, 2019).

Jean Lipman-Blumen, one of the most influential experts on organisational behaviour, defines toxic leadership as: "A process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behaviour and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organisations" (Lipman-Blumen, 2010). Research shows that although the impact of toxic leadership can be felt first and foremost by the direct subordinates, it ultimately affects the entire organisation. While toxic leaders may achieve their goals in the short term, they fail to develop individuals and to build strong teams (Sigh, Sengupta, Dev, 2019). Lipman-Blumen also points out that real harm is done to followers (Lipman-Blumen, 2010). Vlatka Hlupic also argues that "a toxic work environment can affect a person's physical and mental health to the point of shortening their life" (Hlupic, 2020).

According to George Reed, who has studied the United States military, toxic leadership is best viewed as a spectrum. At one end are true psychopaths with profound personality disorders, while at the other end of the scale are individuals with traits that may actually be corrected

¹ The document is currently being reviewed and updated. It will be made available online in late 2021.

or at least mitigated. Reed also argues that a toxic leader's behaviour likely stems from feelings of inferiority, which are often combined with narcissism to create a potentially disastrous mix (Reed, 2015).

How does a leader become toxic?

Toxic leadership is more than just poor leadership. It is a persistent abuse of power and influence to the detriment of subordinates. According to the Army Leadership Doctrine, toxic leaders abuse their command authority to impose their will without considering the ideas and opinions of the team. Communication is strictly top-down, with minimal opportunity for feedback. The toxic leader usually lacks empathy and emotional intelligence and is disinterested in the needs of their team. They often abuse their position to gain an advantage and to enhance their control over people and situations. The toxic leader often intimidates their subordinates by being bad-tempered, overly critical, and dismissive. They criticise, ridicule, interrupt and ignore anybody who challenges them. As a result, the team actively avoid engaging directly with their leader. Finally, it is common for toxic leaders to oppose diversity of thought and to surround themselves with like-minded individuals (ALD, 2016). It is important to remember that for toxic leadership to develop two elements need to be present: susceptible followers and an organisational culture that allows destructive behaviours to grow and to become endemic. An organisation that prioritises discipline and hierarchy while disregarding duty of care and mental health offers fertile ground to toxic leaders. The absence of procedures for reporting toxic leadership behaviours and an opaque and slow approach to dealing with these issues allow them to fester.

A toxic leader also needs followers to enable them. Followers may be unable to challenge the toxic leader, or they may be willing enablers. Followers may want to escape the situation but they may feel powerless as their confidence may have been eroded. They may fear retribution or there may be no appropriate channels and procedures. On the other hand, some subordinates may be willingly enabling the leader and become toxic themselves because of personal ambition or for fear of being singled out by the leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2015).

Time for change

The Army Leadership Doctrine states that "it is imperative that every leader in the Army should seek to be self-aware and understand their impact on others."

So, what can we do about it in the British Army? The answer is complex but not beyond reach. First, it is essential to drag the issue into the open and to start a discussion on what is toxic leadership, how it manifests itself, and how it affects individuals, teams and organisations. Everybody must become able to recognise toxic leadership traits.

Second, we need a change of culture in which any toxic behaviour is considered unacceptable at all ranks and in any form. Everybody, from the most senior leaders down to the most junior cadets, must feel responsible for ensuring that poor leadership behaviours are crushed in their infancy. This can be done in training, open discussions, seminars, and coaching sessions. Finally, "calling out" toxic behaviour is only possible if there is system in place in which concerns are dealt with swiftly, fairly, and openly. Official reporting procedures must be put in place. They must be clear and allow for a fast and transparent review process. The experience of subordinates must also become an integral part of the professional review and promotion procedures for all ranks. The 180-degree feedback tool offers the opportunity for

subordinates to comment on the performance of their leader.² It sends a strong message that leaders must listen to their team and engage with them. By knowing that their own evaluation depends on the assessment of both their superiors as well as of their subordinates, leaders are encouraged to engage with their own leadership style and measure its effectiveness. Hence, the Army's 180-degree can therefore be seen both as a way to protect subordinates as well as to enhance self-development.

Conclusion

Toxic leadership is more than just poor leadership. Its complex nature has a deep impact on individuals and units. Ultimately, it corrupts the entire organisation. My own experience with toxic leadership profoundly shaped me. Precisely because I wanted to ensure that future leaders understood the difference between good and bad leadership, I dedicated myself to Army education and training. I have also actively researched and studied the nature of toxic leadership and how it is being dealt with in other sectors to find ways to fight against it and to eradicate it from the Army. Finally, I continuously work on myself as a leader. I always try to be the best leader I can be. If I can have a positive impact through my own leadership style, even on a single person, then it is worth it.

Questions

1. If somebody came to you to seek advice about how to deal with a toxic leader, what would you say?
2. Is the Army's hierarchical structure and the need to follow orders a breeding ground for toxic leadership? If so, what can the Army do to change its own culture?
3. Is it possible to change the behaviour of leaders who display toxic leadership traits? If so, how?

Further Reading

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² In May 2021, the 180 Leadership Tool went live on MOD Sharepoint (ABN 023/2021). The tool is designed to collect anonymous feedback from subordinates.