

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The impact of toxic leadership environments

By Lt Col RJH Green (AAC)

The new Army Leadership Doctrine (2021) introduced a new section on poor leadership. The document notes that toxic leadership is predicated on three elements: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. The toxic triangle can be thought of as the ability, personality, and values of the leader; the hopes, fears and motives of those that follow them; and the nature of the environment (Furnham 2010). Toxic leadership is chronic in nature and, if left unchallenged, has the potential to undermine the entire organisation (ALD 2.22-2.25). A leader's behaviour affects the morale, cohesion, operational capability, and reputation of their teams and of the entire organisation. The degree to which toxic leadership environments affect the military remains a question that demands attention. Surveys conducted in May 2021 identified that 5% of over 9,000 UK Armed Forces respondents believed they had been subject to bullying in a Service environment within the past year¹ and 10% stated they were not treated fairly at work.²

Whilst substantial academic research has focused on toxic leaders (Padilla et al. 2007; Lipman-Blumen 2010 and 2005), less attention has been paid to the enabling environments that allow toxicity to grow (Zimbardo 2007). Since the consequences of toxicity are profound and affect

¹ MOD Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey Report, Question B.13.1, (n=9719) May 2021.

² Ibid., Question B.13.2, (n=9720).

mission success as well as the lives of personnel, it is essential to understand how military culture might enable toxic leaders.

The unique nature of the military environment

Past failings have been linked to a specific organisational culture and style of leadership in the military. The 2016 Chilcot Report into the British role in Iraq noted failures to challenge leaders; the 2009 Haddon-Cave Report into the RAF Nimrod crash cited “careerism, culture and leadership”, and the 2019 Wigston Report on inappropriate behaviours noted that more must be done “to stop instances of inappropriate behaviour”. The recent Atherton Report on women in the armed forces concludes that the MoD “needs to be proactive in making more space for under-represented groups, including servicewomen, and reforming the prevailing culture”.

Previous CAL Leadership Insights (n. 24, n. 25) focused on the nature of toxic leadership and its impact on subordinates. We also know that followers are an important element in the leadership triangle as they legitimise the leader’s position by lending credibility to behaviours. Within the military, high stock is placed on loyalty to both the organisation and its leaders. In addition, the combination of respect for the rank structure and the promotion system can lead to both conformity and collusion (Reed 2015). However, to flourish, toxic leadership also needs an enabling culture both at team and organisational levels. Poor governance and lack of accountability make it difficult to challenge negative and toxic leadership behaviours, and without appropriate procedures to report and investigate complaints and concerns it is difficult to identify and to sanction potentially toxic behaviours (Whicker 1996). The 2019 Wigston Report notes that, “we must do more to stop instances of inappropriate behaviour occurring.” This is about leadership at every level in the organisation, setting the culture and standards, and ensuring people meet those standards consistently. It is also about a focused system of governance.

Military personnel are inherently able to cope with stressful and life-threatening situations. Instability and a sense of danger may mean that military subordinates are more likely to tolerate extremes of personality and behaviour if they believe them essential to ensuring their safety, accomplishing their mission, controlling instability or reducing anxiety. Yet, the same behaviours, when placed within a hierarchical structure, associated with a strong sense of loyalty and respect of authority, can provide fertile conditions for toxicity to flourish (Reed 2015). Adrian Furnham (2019) notes that military organisations can be characterised by sensitivity to criticism, intolerance of ambiguity, rigid adherence to the rules, and respect for the rank structure above anything else. Loyalty, either to ‘the Boss’ or the organisation, can lead followers to support rather than challenge a toxic leader out of a misplaced sense of duty.

Whilst no organisation benefits in the long-term from toxic leaders, or toxic leadership, some ‘toxic traits’, such as unwavering confidence and ruthless ambition, could be desirable in certain contexts. There is hence a light side to dark traits, as well as a dark side to light traits. However, what happens when a leader who drives people to go beyond their limits, in order to either win on the battlefield or thrive in a crisis, adopts the same short-term behaviours to advance their own career or gain approval from their own superior over a protracted period? Given the central role played on loyalty and discipline in the military context, harsh and abusive behaviour may be more likely to be tolerated and accepted by followers. In short, military organisations, when left unchecked, can provide fertile conditions for toxicity to flourish (Furnham 2019). Hence, it is important to recognise that whilst toxic leadership is never desirable, some of the traits

associated with what we label 'toxic', *may* be accepted if they 'get the job done'. For example, within a short-term, high pressure or dangerous environment – such as high-intensity conflict – a strong or uncompromising leader *might* be the right person for the job. However, issues arise when the same battle-hardened leaders become faced with more 'normal, everyday' management situations and cannot adapt their leadership style either because they are unable to do so, or because they willingly use the same style as a natural contingency. Hence toxic leadership behaviours that *could* be deemed appropriate in combat, are more likely to be entirely inappropriate in either a barracks or an office-based environment. A key observation is that situations and leaders are rarely simple “desirable and undesirable characteristics are not always mutually exclusive... people who are clever can also be cruel... the greatest charmers can convince people to do unpleasant things; the motivated and dedicated can become committed to the wrong causes and prop-up toxic leaders” (Macrae et al. 2018).

Staff turnover is another element that is typical of military environments; this can be considered a double-edged sword when referring to toxic leadership. Military assignments are usually 1-3 years long. Hence, staff seldom have the same leaders or subordinates for a sustained period. This means that toxic leader/follower relationships rarely prevail for longer than the period of overlap, since the parties are separated by systemic staff churn. It encourages subordinates to tolerate toxic leaders and simply ride out the storm, rather than challenge their leader.

Promotion systems within military hierarchies can foster toxicity depending on how candidates are assessed and what information about them is collected. Norman Dixon notes that restricting promotion to internal candidates can lead to overly ambitious and antagonistic behaviours (Dixon 1976). The current promotion and reporting systems are based on racking and stacking peers against one another. These factors can fuel naked ambition and ruthless competitiveness between peers. A system in which the opinion and experience of subordinates is not considered part of the promotion process may allow a toxic leader to hide the effects of their damaging behaviour as long as the organisational goals are being met. The British Military has put robust systems and processes in place to support the professional development of its leaders. For example, there is a growing trend of support for the merit of 360 and 180 feedback, such as Programme CASTLE and the General Staff Mentoring Scheme. Widespread multi-rater reporting systems, such as 360-reporting, could stimulate a paradigm shift towards encouraging more collegiate behaviours between leaders, followers and peers, which would in turn affect the nature of leadership. Based on the assumption that it is difficult to change human nature, a change in “the rules of the game” is another way to shape patterns of behaviour. Another example is the Service Complaints (SC) system, which provides a means for all personnel to submit a grievance, should they feel they have been treated unfairly.

In addressing toxicity, the military continues to take a proactive and multi-faceted approach to target the source as well as the symptoms. This approach must be holistic and include a change of culture, improved governance and increased transparency at all levels. Removing toxic leaders from post sends the right message, but it fails to deal with the environment that allowed, and perhaps enabled, the leader to prosper. Support should be available to all personnel, such as mentoring, coaching, developing, education and training. In addition, leaders must accept constructive criticism from followers and peers as recommended in the Chilcot Report. Finally, example-setting is crucial, at all levels, ranks and grades, through the introduction of effective reporting procedures and timely investigation processes.

Conclusion

It must be recognised that toxicity, like personality, sits on a spectrum. Good governance and accountability are therefore crucial to the prevention of derailment. The 2021 Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey (AFCAS) results indicated that 4% had never heard of the SC system and a further 18% had heard of it but knew nothing about it.³ This demonstrates that the British Military needs to do more to broaden awareness of the SC system. In addition, those who are aware of the system must have confidence that they will receive support, their grievance will be taken seriously, the process will be transparent and if problems are identified, they will be dealt with appropriately.

Today, more so than ever, the MOD invests in a positive leadership culture, values and standards, and the associated ethical frameworks that support the moral component. The British Military does not ignore toxic leadership, it does not tolerate it, and it has increasingly effective systems and ambitions to address it. However, derailment can occur because of individual and environmental factors. There is a continued need for good governance, checks and balances to intercept it. The British Military remains vulnerable to toxic leadership and more can be done to address the issue. Leaders who exhibit some of the traits associated with toxicity can thrive in short-term extreme situations; however, the same individuals could be less suitable to the boardroom that they are the battlefield and, if unchecked by their environment, will damage their organisation.

Questions

1. What is the difference between a strong leader and a toxic leader?
2. What is the role of peers and superiors in dealing with toxic leadership?
3. What other organisational changes might prevent or reduce toxicity?

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³ Question B.13.44, AFCAS 2021. (n=9671).