

TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN THE MILITARY ORGANIZATION – A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO FAILED LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: *The toxic leadership refers to destructive behaviours and leaders’ personal characteristics which cause serious damage to the subordinates and organizations. Still, what is toxic for the military in one country can be good in another one, given the cultural differences. This article wants to emphasize, from a theoretical approach, the main characteristics and effects of toxic leadership within the military organization.*

Keywords: leadership, toxic, leader behaviour, military

1. Introduction

Any military organization wants to get rid of their toxic leaders, especially on the higher ranks. Studies have showed that mainly that one in five may see his superior as toxic or unethical [1]. As an institution which represents high values, behaviors and ethics, the military organizations must be careful to toxic leadership given the serious consequences that might occur. There is no field within the military that might not be affected by toxic leaders, their orders and/or policies.

Why is there so much interest in this matter? Because a small number of toxic leaders can destroy the whole work of so many. Their actions reduce the organizational effectiveness, alter the organization’s image in the exterior, and in many cases can increase costs.

Toxic leaders are those leaders who take part in destructive behaviors, show dysfunctional personal characteristics [2] and take advantage of others for their own welfare. They lack concern for their subordinates, their well-being, and affect in

a negative manner the organizational climate. Toxic leaders are using charm and wits, plus a strong personal ambition, things that are making them able to manipulate, instead of influencing people.

2. Toxic leadership from an emotional perspective

From an emotional intelligence perspective, we could agree that the toxic leadership is just a fake pseudo-leadership [3]. So, instead of modeling and encouraging the employees to make a healthy effort, and to develop an empathic culture, the toxic leaders encourage perfectionist behaviors, which have as a result the fear to fail and to assume risks. That kind of leaders are mainly focused on productivity instead of creativity or new development strategies, or as it is often required in the military, *initiative*. If an authentic leader makes no difference between its subordinates, making direct assessments, for the toxic leaders is never enough. Both of those leaders try to bring a psychological comfort to their subordinates. Still, if a real leader creates a

real comfort, the toxic one doesn't accept any trace of negative emotion. On the other hand, if normally an authentic leader embraces the long-life learning concept and agrees that you can always learn from the others, the toxic one thinks he owns the absolute truth and that he's an expert for all possible domains. Furthermore, if assuming active contributions and real risks is a normal attitude of a leader, the toxic one

has a self-defensive behavior and doesn't assume either risks or responsibilities. Many times, that kind of behaviors or incompetence are hidden behind the abusive usage of delegation.

So, from this perspective, how do we fix it? Could it work by highlighting the importance of the emotional intelligence within the military and by putting more emphasis on the leader interpersonal skills?

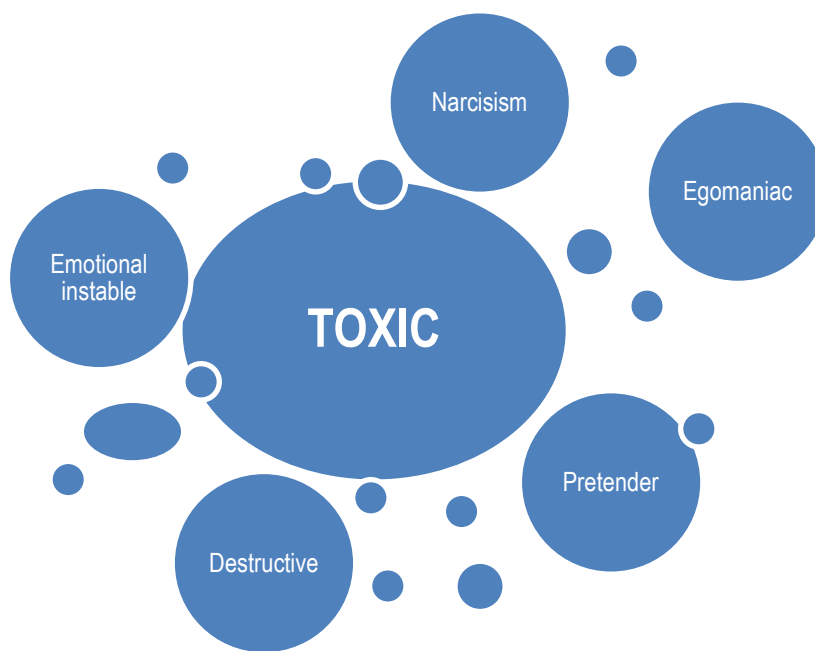


Figure 1: Toxic leader personal characteristics

3. Toxic leader personal characteristics:

One other undesirable characteristic, yet present, of the toxic leader is *narcissism*. Most, if not all of the toxic leaders, have a high level of narcissism [4]. Poor listener, taking always the credit, excessive bravado [5] and inconsideration towards subordinates are all characteristics of toxic leaders. They always consider they are the smarter than everyone, they're arrogant and infatuated. From a *follower outcomes* perspective, those undesired characteristics might even make the subordinates have a

great intention to leave the organization [6], manifest absenteeism or even anxiety. Regarding the *building the team* process and the *team outcomes*, favouritism will make the team members feel socially isolated and the working environment confrontational and conflictual.

'The leader identifies his ego as a personality whose conduct, affectivity, thoughts and other characteristics, relatively stable over a period of time, are unique'[7]. The ego has not just positive contributions. In this case, *the egomaniac* type of toxic

leader is described as a leader which is highly competitive, ambitious and yet noxious to the others. It thinks that all the others no matter if they are subordinates or colleagues, are less competent, less effective, lazy and not trustworthy. That kind of leaders hate to be wrong, to do mistakes or to hear bad news [8]. He's abusive and do not see the implications on subordinate's morale or the effect it has when conducting military operations.

4. Theoretical recommendations:

True army leaders are persons of character, presence and intellect. They *lead, develop and achieve* [9]. They lead others (using compliance and commitment, providing purpose and motivation), build trust, build consensus, and resolve conflicts. They lead by example, create a positive working climate, encourage initiative and develop others. They achieve results by promoting team work, providing direction guidance

and support. Those leaders are responsible of identifying those toxic leaders, council them and try to bring them on the right path. If persistent or with a devastating impact on the military organization or on the impact of combat situations they should deal prompt and even aggressively with the problem. The responsibility of the top leaders is clear. They have to review leaders' behaviour as part of their performance schedule and act immediately against the toxic leaders as soon as they are identified. The organizational culture and climate must be a positive one. Leaders and subordinates must react against toxic behaviours and toxic leaders as soon as they are discovered. Through education, training and a 360-degree assessment program, those leaders will be easy to identify, their actions will be easy to counteract and within the military organization a culture of positive change will be promoted.

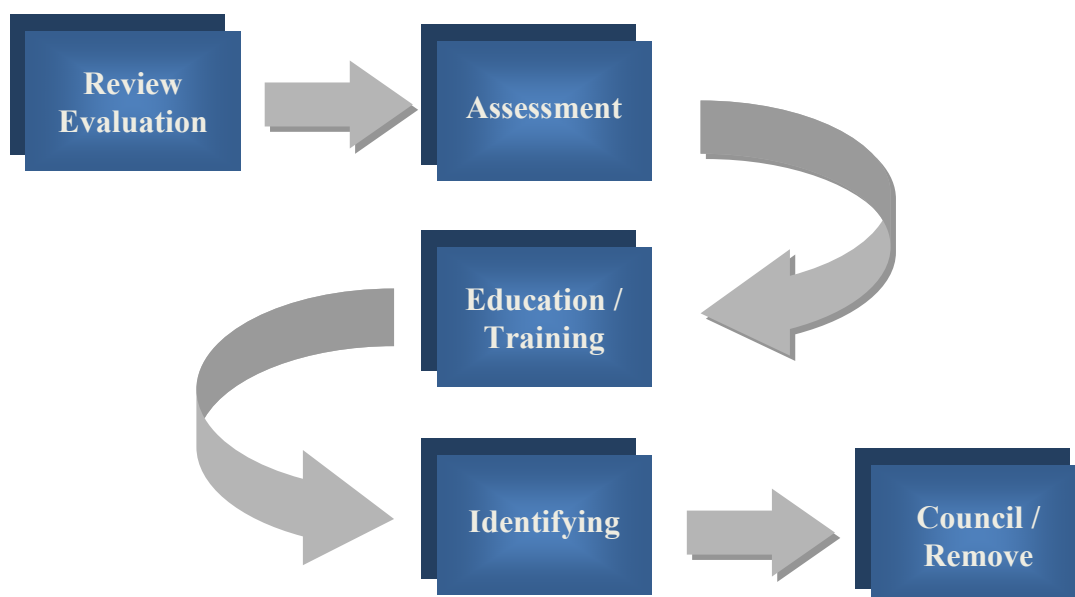


Figure 2: Counteracting toxic leaders (proposal)

5. Conclusions:

Although toxic leadership is present in each type of organization, it is barely recognized by the top leaders. Usually, measures are taken at the end of certain actions, or even too late, when the direct effects are

devastating for the organizations or subordinates. By recognizing the existence and presence of toxic leaders in the military, it should be much easier to identify and deal with, investigate the phenomenon and analyse its effects, and not

in the least, be able to train and educate the young military, so that this type of leaders will not be able to reach high hierarchy positions. Nonetheless, we should not

forget that what toxic is for a nation's army could be good for other, given the cultural aspects and social environment.

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