

The Cost of Tolerating Toxic Behaviors in the Department of Defense Workplace

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There is significant anecdotal evidence of toxic behaviors of leaders in the U.S. military. Although the effects of toxic leadership, abusive supervision, bullying, and incivility are well-researched in the civilian sector, the military departments have not conducted empirical research among their members. However, a few individual military members have taken the initiative to conduct research, the results of which suggest significant prevalence and adverse effects of toxic leadership.¹ The persistent costs associated with toxic leadership are significant due to the fact that behaviors tend to fall under the threshold of legal action, organizations and their members tend to tolerate it and endure it for an extended time, and it is not addressed until it reaches a level of high adverse impact. The typical response of the military departments once a leader has been clearly identified as toxic and counterproductive is dismissal from service. This practice provides a decisive and easy response to assign blame but ignores the pervasiveness of toxic behaviors in spite of research that indicates toxic behaviors occur and toxic leaders exist because the organizational culture empowers them.²

Various types of counterproductive behaviors in the workplace such as incivility, bullying, harassment, abusive supervision, and toxic leadership have been empirically associated with a variety of effects, including degraded physical and mental health, employee turnover, absenteeism, suicide, and decreased performance. These counterproductive behaviors and their effects contradict ethical standards of leadership and have a significant adverse impact on military readiness, which is directly related to then Secretary of Defense James Mattis's memorandums to all Department of Defense (DOD) personnel titled "Ethical Standards for All Personnel" and "Ethics Sentinels." In the latter, he stated, "We must all set the example, rejecting any sense of personal entitlement to privilege or benefit, never abusing our position or looking the other way when something is wrong."³ Toxic leadership and tolerance of it are ethical issues that public leaders and government organizations have a moral obligation to confront to ensure the effective and efficient use of public resources.⁴

(Original graphic created by macrovector, www.freepik.com; graphic adapted by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

Some private-sector studies have attempted to calculate the costs associated with these counterproductive behaviors and their effects.⁵ An organization or institution and its members react to toxic behaviors much like an organism reacts to poisonous toxins—with degraded abilities to process nutrients, reproduce, flourish, and produce. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present a method for calculating the cost of toxic behaviors in the DOD in order to demonstrate its pervasiveness and the high cost of tolerating it.

Although a detailed description of toxic leadership is beyond the scope of this article and has been defined elsewhere extensively, a brief description is in order to establish context. The term *toxic leadership* does not describe the run-of-the-mill mean boss. A toxic leader is characterized by a pattern of counterproductive, abusive, and uncivil behaviors, including

- shaming (the exercise of humiliation, sarcasm, potshots, or mistake-pointing with the intent of reducing another's self-worth),
- passive hostility (the use of passive-aggressive behavior with the intent of directing one's anger inappropriately),
- team sabotage (meddling with the intent to either establish one's personal power base or make the team less productive),
- an apparent lack of regard and compassion for the welfare of subordinates,
- an interpersonal style that has a negative impact on organizational climate, and
- the perception that the superior is getting ahead at team member expense.⁶

A toxic leader is not necessarily the stereotypical screamer but more often appears to be a pleasant and talented individual who has subtle ways of degrading and exploiting others for personal gain and takes pleasure in doing so.

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Attempting to calculate the cost of toxic leadership presents several challenges. First, although there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence of toxic leadership, there is a dearth of research on the prevalence of toxic leadership within the DOD, limiting the ability to conduct an exact cost estimate and leading the author to rely somewhat on

rate of bullying within the U.S. workplace is 10 percent but could be as high as 30-50 percent.⁹ The 2007 National Government Ethics Survey found 23 percent of employees observed abusive behavior in the workplace, a figure that is consistent with the private sector.¹⁰ In the 2010 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL), approximately 20 percent of re-

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private sector research. Additionally, calculating the cost in terms of time and money is difficult since military and civilian employees work a variety of hours during the day and throughout the year. Some work more than eight hours a day and some take more days of leave than others. Also, calculating the average hourly wage of DOD military and civilian employees is a challenge due to the variety of pay scales and the number of people in each grade or rank. Therefore, for simplicity, this article will make assumptions about the prevalence of toxic behaviors, average annual income, and average hourly wages.

Method

The following model provides a five-step process used by the author to determine the costs of organizational toxicity to the military. The results appear to bring to light the astonishingly high price of toxic leadership.

Step 1: Determine the prevalence. The first step in calculating the cost of organizational toxicity is to determine the percentage of personnel who will experience toxicity in an organization. In other words, what is the likelihood that an employee will become a target? A search of databases revealed no specific research on the prevalence of toxicity in the DOD. This, in and of itself, is an issue that needs to be addressed and researched using models developed by Mitchell Kusy, Elizabeth Holloway, Christine Pearson, and Christine Porath.⁷ Research among civilian organizations in the United States suggests that between 10 and 16 percent of U.S. workers experience workplace aggression.⁸ Another study indicates the

spondents identified their leader as toxic.¹¹ And recently, the Global Business Ethics Survey found that 21 percent of private sector employees observed abusive behavior, of which, 24 percent demonstrated a persistent pattern; 63 percent was perpetrated by first line, middle, and senior leaders; and 58 percent was considered severe or very severe.¹² Additionally, in 2015, twenty-eight thousand of the ninety thousand charges (nearly one-third) that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received related to the private sector and state or local government workplaces were of harassment in some form, often on the basis of sex, age, disability, national origin, and religion.¹³ In the federal sector, 43 percent of complaints were of harassment. Clear differences between DOD and civilian workplaces such as culture, values, structure, power and authority, interpersonal relationships, mission, and reporting systems affect the prevalence of toxicity. Under federal guidelines, harassment is primarily directed against a specific characteristic of the targeted person, which is not always the case regarding toxic leadership. Another factor that influences the prevalence is the impact on witnesses to abuse, who may not be the target who submits a complaint but nevertheless is affected to a similar degree.¹⁴ Therefore, considering these factors, and in the absence of definitive research of toxicity in the DOD, this model will estimate that 10 percent of DOD personnel experience toxicity. Granted, depending on the culture and the patterns of behavior of leaders, some organizations will experience more toxicity than others. Nevertheless, organizations can use 10 percent as a general guideline in estimating the cost of toxic behavior.

Step 2: Calculate the number of personnel who experience toxicity. The second step is to calculate the number of personnel who experience toxicity in a year by multiplying the estimated percentage of prevalence and the total number of personnel in an organization. In order to conduct a sample calculation, let us use a notional DOD organization consisting of a mix of one thousand military and civilian employees. Using our guideline of 10 percent, one hundred employees would experience toxic behaviors.

Step 3: Calculate the average hourly wage of employees. The average hourly wage per employee is needed in order to calculate the monetary waste of certain effects of toxic behaviors on personnel. Ideally, an organization would calculate the average hourly wage by dividing its total compensation budget by the total number of employees and then by the total number of annual work hours (52 weeks x 40 hours = 2080 work hours).

The average annual wage of federal employees is approximately \$89,000.¹⁵ The average annual wage of DOD civilians is about \$78,000.¹⁶ The average annual pay for the U.S. Army is estimated at \$57,000; for the U.S. Air Force is \$59,000; for the U.S. Navy is \$63,000; and for the U.S. Marine Corps is \$48,000.¹⁷ For the purpose of this model, assume that the average annual wage of all military and civilian personnel in the DOD is \$50,000. Considering a forty-hour work week, the average wage per hour would be \$50,000 divided by 2,080 hours (40 hours x 52 weeks) or \$24 per hour. Although employees do not work a full fifty-two weeks, for consistency this model uses fifty-two weeks since not all military and civilian members use the twenty-four to twenty-eight days of paid leave they earn per year.

Step 4: Calculate the percentage of effects. Step four involves calculating the effects of toxicity experienced by personnel, based on the number of people affected. Based on their research on incivility, Pearson and Porath estimate that 53 percent of personnel lose work time worrying about past and present interactions with the toxic person, 28 percent lose work time avoiding the toxic person, 37 percent experience a decline in their commitment to the organization, 22 percent intentionally reduce their effort, 10 percent intentionally decrease their time at work, 46 percent think about changing jobs, and 12 percent actually change jobs.¹⁸ In a recent survey of toxic leadership among military and federal government employees, based on being affected by a toxic leader at least twice a week, 58.2 percent said they avoided the toxic leader, 51.6

percent worried about interaction, 2.2 percent experienced increased absenteeism, 43.9 percent discussed the toxicity with a coworker, 51.1 percent discussed it with a family member, 15.4 percent experienced increased physical health issues, and 17 percent experienced increased mental health issues.¹⁹ For the purposes of the model, the following percentages will be used to calculate the number of people affected in specific ways: worry—50 percent, avoidance—58 percent, absenteeism—2.2 percent, talking with coworkers—44 percent, physical health—15 percent, and mental health—1 percent. Based on these percentages, and as a result of experiencing toxic behaviors, out of one hundred employees, fifty worry, fifty-eight practice avoidance, two practice absenteeism, forty-four talk with coworkers, fifteen have physical issues, and seventeen develop mental health issues.

Step 5: Calculate the cost. Step five involves calculating the costs to the organization of each of these effects, as determined by the number of employees affected in specific ways, the number of hours lost due to toxicity, and the average hourly wage. In Kenneth Williams's survey of military and federal employees, participants stated that, on a weekly basis, they spent 2.51 hours avoiding the toxic leader, 3.66 hours worrying, 3.23 hours talking with coworkers about the toxic leader, 1.78 hours talking with a family member, and 1 hour absent from work (slightly over 30 minutes at physical health appointments and slightly less than 30 minutes at mental health appointments) for a total of 15.95 hours per week.²⁰

Cost of worrying. Based on our calculations in step four, 50 employees spend 3.66 hours a week worrying for a total of 9,516 hours annually, which at \$24 per hour results in a cost of \$228,750.

Cost of avoidance. The cost of avoidance would be 58 employees x 2.51 hours per week for 52 weeks at \$24 per hour, which is \$181,975.

Conversations with coworkers. The cost of conversation among employees about toxic behaviors would be 44 employees x 3.23 hours per week for 52 weeks at \$24 per hour, which is \$177,650.

Cost of absenteeism. The cost of absenteeism would be 2 employees x 1 hour per week for 52 weeks at \$24 per hour, which amounts to \$2,750.

Costs of physical and mental health. Fifteen employees x 30 minutes per week for 52 weeks for a total of 390 hours annually at \$24 per hour, which is \$9,375, and add to this the cost of medical care. The average annual salary for a

Table 1. Toxic Behavior Cost Calculation of Hypothetical One-Thousand Member Organization

Prevalence	10%		
Number of personnel who experience toxic behaviors	100		
Hourly wage	\$24		
Annual salary	\$50,000		
Annual work hours (40 hours/week x 52 weeks)	2,080		
Cost of effects	Number of employees	Hours per week	Cost
Lost time worrying (50%)	50	3.66	\$228,750
Lost time avoiding toxic person (58%)	58	2.51	\$181,975
Lost time talking with other employees (44%)	44	3.23	\$177,650
Absenteeism (2.2%)	2	1.00	\$2,750
Physical health issues (15%)	15	0.50	\$9,375
Mental health issues (17%)	17	0.50	\$10,625
Physician (\$76 per hour)	15	0.50	\$29,640
Mental health provider (\$76 per hour)	17	0.50	\$33,592
Replacement costs	Number of employees	Cost per employee	Cost
Departed as a target (25% of affected)	25	\$75,000	\$1,875,000
Departed as a witness (20% of affected)	20	\$75,000	\$1,500,000
	Number affected*	Lost man hours	Cost**
Total annual cost of toxicity	218	140,695	\$4,049,357

(Table by author. *Includes employees affected in multiple ways. **Does not include costs due to (1) degraded performance resulting from decreased commitment, motivation, and innovation; (2) lost time for managing toxic employees; and (3) lost time for investigations [Inspector general, legal, equal opportunity office, and equal employment opportunity office])

physician is \$159,000 for an hourly wage of about \$76 x 390 hours, which is \$29,640. Seventeen employees x 30 minutes per week for 52 weeks for a total of 442 hours annually at \$24 per hour, which is \$10,625. Add to this the cost of a mental health provider, whose average annual

salary is about \$159,000 or \$76 per hour for 442 hours, which is \$33,592. Note that these calculations do not include medication, testing, and other support services. The estimated total cost of physical and mental health care due to toxic behaviors is \$83,232.

**Table 2. Toxic Behavior Cost Calculation of U.S. Army
(Military and Civilian Population 719,607*)**

Prevalence	10%		
Number of personnel who experience toxic behaviors	71,961		
Hourly wage	\$24		
Annual salary	\$50,000		
Annual work hours (40 hours/week x 52 weeks)	2,080		
Cost of effects	Number of employees	Hours per week	Cost
Lost time worrying (50%)	35,980	3.66	\$164,610,101.25
Lost time avoiding toxic person (58%)	41,737	2.51	\$130,950,483.83
Lost time talking with other employees (44%)	31,663	3.23	\$127,838,183.55
Absenteeism (2.2%)	1,583	1.00	\$1,978,919.25
Physical health issues (15%)	10,794	0.50	\$6,746,315.63
Mental health issues (17%)	12,233	0.50	\$7,645,824.38
Physician (\$76 per hour)	10,794	0.50	\$21,329,151.43
Mental health provider (\$76 per hour)	12,233	0.50	\$24,173,038.34
Replacement costs	Number of employees	Cost per employee	Cost
Departed as a target (25% of affected)	17,990	\$75,000	\$1,349,263,125
Departed as a witness (20% of affected)	14,392	\$75,000	\$1,079,410,500
	Number affected**	Lost man hours	Cost***
Total annual cost of toxicity	157,018	101,245,366	\$2,913,945,642.70

(Table by author. *Defense Manpower Data Center as of 30 September 2018. **Includes employees affected in multiple ways. ***Does not include costs due to (1) degraded performance resulting from decreased commitment, motivation, and innovation; (2) lost time for managing toxic employees; and (3) lost time for investigations [Inspector general, legal, equal opportunity office, and equal employment opportunity office])

Replacement costs of departing employees. Research indicates that 25 percent of bullied team members and 20 percent of witnesses to bullying depart an organization.²¹ In order to calculate the replacement costs of departed employees, first calculate the cost of replacing the average

team member, which would include recruiting, interviewing, onboarding, and training. The process of accessioning new service members and providing continuing professional development is quite expensive and difficult to determine. One study suggests that replacement costs

**Table 3. Toxic Behavior Cost Calculation of U.S. Navy
(Military and Civilian Population 521,098*)**

Prevalence	10%		
Number of personnel who experience toxic behaviors	52,110		
Hourly wage	\$24		
Annual salary	\$50,000		
Annual work hours (40 hours/week x 52 weeks)	2,080		
Cost of effects	Number of employees	Hours per week	Cost
Lost time worrying (50%)	26,928	3.66	\$119,201,168
Lost time avoiding toxic person (58%)	30,224	2.51	\$94,826,809
Lost time talking with other employees (44%)	22,928	3.23	\$92,573,060
Absenteeism (2.2%)	1,146	1.00	\$1,433,020
Physical health issues (15%)	7,816	0.50	\$4,885,294
Mental health issues (17%)	8,859	0.50	\$5,536,666
Physician (\$76 per hour)	7,816	0.50	\$15,445,345
Mental health provider (\$76 per hour)	8,859	0.50	\$17,504,724
Replacement costs	Number of employees	Cost per employee	Cost
Departed as a target (25% of affected)	13,027	\$75,000	\$977,058,750
Departed as a witness (20% of affected)	10,422	\$75,000	\$781,647,000
	Number affected**	Lost man hours	Cost***
Total annual cost of toxicity	113,704	73,316,071	\$2,110,111,834

(Table by author. *Defense Manpower Data Center as of 30 September 2018. **Includes employees affected in multiple ways. ***Does not include costs due to (1) degraded performance resulting from decreased commitment, motivation, and innovation; (2) lost time for managing toxic employees; and (3) lost time for investigations [Inspector general, legal, equal opportunity office, and equal employment opportunity office])

for jobs paying \$30,000 to \$75,000 are about 16 percent of the salary while high-paying jobs cost up to 213 percent of the salary.²² The military departments should conduct a detailed analysis of replacing members who separate. For the purposes of our hypothetical example, a general

guideline for replacement cost is 1.5 times the departing team members' annual salary.²³ The replacement cost for each departing employee is obtained by multiplying the average annual salary of \$50,000 by 1.5, which is \$75,000. The number of employees who depart due to being direct

**Table 4. Toxic Behavior Cost Calculation of U.S. Air Force
(Military and Civilian Population 489,958*)**

Prevalence	10%		
Number of personnel who experience toxic behaviors	48,996		
Hourly wage	\$24		
Annual salary	\$50,000		
Annual work hours (40 hours/week x 52 weeks)	2,080		
Cost of effects	Number of employees	Hours per week	Cost
Lost time worrying (50%)	24,498	3.66	\$112,077,893
Lost time avoiding toxic person (58%)	28,418	2.51	\$89,160,107
Lost time talking with other employees (44%)	21,558	3.23	\$87,041,039
Absenteeism (2.2%)	1,078	1.00	\$1,347,385
Physical health issues (15%)	7,349	0.50	\$4,593,356
Mental health issues (17%)	8,329	0.50	\$5,205,804
Physician (\$76 per hour)	7,349	0.50	\$14,522,355
Mental health provider (\$76 per hour)	8,329	0.50	\$16,458,669
Replacement costs	Number of employees	Cost per employee	Cost
Departed as a target (25% of affected)	12,249	\$75,000	\$918,671,250
Departed as a witness (20% of affected)	9,799	\$75,000	\$734,937,000
	Number affected**	Lost man hours	Cost***
Total annual cost of toxicity	106,909	68,934,817	\$1,984,014,857

(Table by author. *Defense Manpower Data Center as of 30 September 2018. **Includes employees affected in multiple ways. ***Does not include costs due to (1) degraded performance resulting from decreased commitment, motivation, and innovation; (2) lost time for managing toxic employees; and (3) lost time for investigations [Inspector general, legal, equal opportunity office, and equal employment opportunity office])

targets of toxic behaviors is 125 (.25 x 100 = 25), and the number of employees who depart due to witnessing toxic behaviors is 100 (.20 x 100 = 20) for a total number of 45 employees who depart due to toxicity. Hypothetically, considering a 1,000-member organization, the cost to

replace departed members would be 45 employees x \$75,000, which equals \$3,375,000.

The combined total cost of toxic behaviors in a hypothetical 1,000-employee organization would amount to \$4,049,357 and 140,695 lost work hours, as

**Table 5. Toxic Behavior Cost Calculation of U.S. Marine Corps
(Military and Civilian Population 203,167*)**

Prevalence	10%		
Number of personnel who experience toxic behaviors	20,317		
Hourly wage	\$24		
Annual salary	\$50,000		
Annual work hours (40 hours/week x 52 weeks)	2,080		
Cost of effects	Number of employees	Hours per week	Cost
Lost time worrying (50%)	10,158	3.66	\$46,474,451
Lost time avoiding toxic person (58%)	11,784	2.51	\$36,971,315
Lost time talking with other employees (44%)	8,939	3.23	\$36,092,618
Absenteeism (2.2%)	447	1.00	\$558,709
Physical health issues (15%)	3,048	0.50	\$1,904,691
Mental health issues (17%)	3,454	0.50	\$2,158,649
Physician (\$76 per hour)	3,048	0.50	\$6,021,870
Mental health provider (\$76 per hour)	3,454	0.50	\$6,824,786
Replacement costs	Number of employees	Cost per employee	Cost
Departed as a target (25% of affected)	5,079	\$75,000	\$380,938,125
Departed as a witness (20% of affected)	4,063	\$75,000	\$304,750,500
	Number affected**	Lost man hours	Cost***
Total annual cost of toxicity	44,331	28,584,654	\$822,695,714

(Table by author. *Defense Manpower Data Center, as of 30 September 2018. **Includes employees affected in multiple ways. ***Does not include costs due to (1) degraded performance resulting from decreased commitment, motivation, and innovation; (2) lost time for managing toxic employees; and (3) lost time for investigations [inspector general, legal, Equal Opportunity, and Equal Employment Opportunity].)

detailed in table 1 (on page 58). Notice that this calculation does not include the cost of diminished performance due to sleep loss, increased stress, and decreased motivation, commitment, innovation, and performance. Nor does it include the time and resources required for leaders

to manage toxic employees, for inspectors general and investigating officers to conduct inquiries, and for legal services and equal opportunity advisers to provide support.

Applying this model to the military departments and to the specific DOD members reveals some staggering costs, as

Table 6. Toxic Behavior Cost Calculation of Department of Defense Proper (Population 110,170*)

Prevalence	10%		
Number of personnel who experience toxic behaviors	11,017		
Hourly wage	\$24		
Annual salary	\$50,000		
Annual work hours (40 hours/week x 52 weeks)	2,080		
Cost of effects	Number of employees	Hours per week	Cost
Lost time worrying (50%)	5,509	3.66	\$25,201,388
Lost time avoiding toxic person (58%)	6,390	2.51	\$20,048,186
Lost time talking with other employees (44%)	4,847	3.23	\$19,571,701
Absenteeism (2.2%)	242	1.00	\$302,968
Physical health issues (15%)	1,653	0.50	\$1,032,844
Mental health issues (17%)	1,873	0.50	\$1,170,556
Physician (\$76 per hour)	1,653	0.50	\$3,265,439
Mental health provider (\$76 per hour)	1,873	0.50	\$3,700,831
Replacement costs	Number of employees	Cost per employee	Cost
Departed as a target (25% of affected)	2,754	\$75,000	\$206,568,750
Departed as a witness (20% of affected)	2,203	\$75,000	\$165,255,000
	Number affected**	Lost man hours	Cost***
Total annual cost of toxicity	24,039	15,500,408	\$446,117,661

(Table by author. *Defense Manpower Data Center, as of 30 September 2018. **Includes employees affected in multiple ways. ***Does not include costs due to (1) degraded performance resulting from decreased commitment, motivation, and innovation; (2) lost time for managing toxic employees; and (3) lost time for investigations [inspector general, legal, Equal Opportunity, and Equal Employment Opportunity].)

detailed in tables 2 thru 6 (on pages 59–63). Using 2016 personnel numbers, the total costs estimated by the model are: U.S. Army, \$2,913,945,643; U.S. Navy, \$2,110,111,834; U.S. Air Force, \$1,984,014,857; U.S. Marine Corps, \$822,695,714; and DOD, \$446,117,661 for a total cost of \$8,276,885,708.

Conclusions

The cumulative effect of toxic leadership is costly, in both opportunity costs, such as wasted time and degraded performance, and in actual costs to the budget, such as increased medical expenditures. At first glance, the

estimated costs appear astronomical and unbelievable. While the model is not without some fault and assumptions may not be exact, one thing is clear—the costs of the effects of toxic behavior add up. Upon further examination, considering the daily abuse, bullying, incivility, and degrading behavior that toxic leaders perpetrate on their targets, the model and the costs are at least close to accurate and may actually be underestimated. Consider that most toxic behaviors fall under the threshold for legal action and that the behaviors continue for a long duration until they become so obvious that supervisors finally take action.²⁴ For the sake of argument, even if the prevalence of toxic leadership was 5 percent or the average annual salary was \$40,000, the calculation would still result in a significant cost. The model suggests, first, that a toxic leader has a significant effect on the organization and, second, that the effects of toxic leadership extend far beyond the toxic leader and continue even when he or she is dismissed, indicating an underlying, systemic, cultural, and organizational disease. The cumulative effect of toxic leadership amounts to a significant cost and waste of time, resources, money, and members.

Some may argue that the costs of weak leaders are just as significant and that harsh leadership is required in order to accomplish the mission. While it is true that leaders on both extremes of weakness and toxicity

sabotage performance and create waste, the focus of this article is on the costs of toxic leadership and the recommendation is that leaders who balance respectful engagement with firm accountability create the conditions for the best performance.

Overlooked coping behaviors are significant. Lost time due to worry, avoidance, and “watercooler talk,” although often considered harmless and a sign of individual weakness, is highly costly. When the targets of a toxic leader voice their concerns or file a grievance, they are often dismissed or marginalized as disgruntled complainers or weak members. Then, as performance declines, the leader blames the victim rather than recognizing the toxic conditions that he or she created.²⁵ However, as the model indicates, these coping behaviors result in significant opportunity costs to the organization in time, money, and productivity.

Toxic leadership is unhealthy. Toxic behaviors add a significant drain on an already overburdened health care system. The model is consistent with research that associates degraded physical and mental health with

toxic leadership. These costs are unnecessary and are preventable by addressing toxic leadership and promoting



healthy leadership. Leadership that is respectful, humble, and compassionate promotes the healthy conditions for members to thrive not just survive. Whereas a toxic leader degrades, abuses, and exploits others for personal gain, a healthy leader respects, nurtures, and empowers team and organizational success. The benefits of a healthy leader are increased physical and mental health, reducing the demands on the health care system.

Toxic leadership degrades recruiting and retention. A substantial percentage of targets and witnesses of toxic leadership choose to separate from the military due to their experiences of serving under a toxic leader. This puts a strain on retention of trained and experienced members and therefore a strain on recruiting, which is very expensive. In 2002, the cost of a new U.S. Marine Corps service member was \$44,887, which included recruiting costs of advertising, college funds, and enlistment bonuses at \$6,539; training costs of uniforms, equipment, laundry, and meals at \$1,614; training at \$301; pay, allowances, clothing, and moving expenses at \$19,973; ammunition at \$787; and drill instructors, trainers, and support staff at \$15,674.²⁶ The cost of accessioning enlisted personnel of other branches of the military is similar. Also, in 2002, the cost of an officer graduating from the United States Military Academy was \$340,000.²⁷ Certainly, the costs of accessioning service members have increased in sixteen years. The DOD's tolerance of toxic leadership and hostile working conditions gives the appearance that low retention rates are of little concern, that there will always be an endless supply of qualified recruits who can be enticed to enlist with college funds and enlistment bonuses. The reality is the key recruiting demographic, ages seventeen to twenty-four years are becoming increasingly unqualified for military service. Officers leave due to zero defects and risk aversion that suppresses innovation and talent.²⁸ Toxic leaders play a significant role in creating this oppressive environment. In the future, the DOD will most likely face significant challenges in recruiting quality candidates due to these factors, as well as the tension between increasing recruiting costs and modernizing the military. Although in recent years the DOD budget has been increasing, the current increases for the purpose of modernization does not mean funding is unlimited,

but the military must use its funding efficiently. Due to a strong civilian job market, the supply of qualified candidates is decreasing at a faster rate than the military is downsizing.²⁹ Additionally, it seems both ethical and prudent to address toxic leadership—to provide our military and its members with the most effective leaders and to prevent waste of resources.

In addition to the loss of targets and witnesses to toxic leadership, there is a high cost of dismissing and replacing toxic leaders. The military has invested greatly in the development of leaders, providing education and training. Most often, toxic leaders are highly skilled and provide needed abilities and experience. By simply dismissing a toxic leader, the military loses a valuable team member. While dismissal may be necessary in some cases, the military must weigh the costs and benefits of either dismissal or retention.

Recommendations

The waste of resources due to toxic leadership suggested by this article indicates that the DOD could reap significant savings by addressing toxic leadership and improving the quality of leadership among its members. An obvious, initial recommendation is for the DOD to conduct a comprehensive empirical study of toxic leadership among its members to determine its extent and impact. Reducing the prevalence of toxic leadership would result in decreasing the waste of resources—time, money, and personnel. Several authors and researchers have indicated the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing toxic behaviors.³⁰ Interventions include individual, small group, and organizational character development, leadership training, and culture change.

Leader training and development. The means of addressing toxic, counterproductive leadership cannot be limited to punishment, removal, and dismissal nor individualistic character development. Leaders need skills in demonstrating and promoting respect among team members. Leader training at all levels of professional military education should incorporate empirically validated methods of reinforcing a culture of respect, humility, compassion, and selfless service. Leader development must involve instruction in creating the conditions for empowering members and eliminating constraints and barriers. Leaders must be skilled in responding effectively to complaints and in reinforcing a culture of respect in small groups and teams in which all members are valued, and no one is exploited or degraded for personal gain.

(Original graphic created by macrovector, www.freepik.com; graphic adapted by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

Leader assessment. Supervisors tend to give attention to the results of subordinates, ignoring the manner in which the results are obtained. The bias toward accomplishing the mission results in a leader receiving an exemplary performance evaluation that leads to promotion and advancement. Since toxic leaders are experts in appearances, they tend to benefit from the biased performance evaluation system. Supervisory leaders need skills in identifying toxic behaviors, confronting subordinates, and coaching soldiers in healthy leadership.

Much research and anecdotal evidence indicate that toxic leaders demonstrated toxic behaviors early in their careers. Targets and witnesses often state, “Everyone knew what he or she was like as a lieutenant (or captain, or major, etc.)” Given that patterns of toxic behavior are exhibited early in a career, supervisors need to initiate developmental intervention to prune disrespectful and abusive behaviors. Leader development and assessment should not be limited to technical, tactical, and operational skills but also respectful treatment in leading the team to get results. This course correction needs to occur long before toxic behavior escalates to the point that it requires dismissal and loss of expertise.

Organizational culture and policies. Not only are supervisors’ results biased, but there is also an organizational cultural bias toward achieving results, thereby resulting in a cultural tolerance of toxic behavior. As long as the mission is accomplished and the behavior is not extreme, toxic behavior is sometimes tacitly condoned as an acceptable element of a tough military. This tolerance allows toxic leaders to “fly under the radar.” However, this tolerance ignores the corrosive effects of toxic leadership on resources and performance. There is a difference between a tough leader who prepares members for the demands of the mission and an abusive boss who exploits members for personal gain and pleasure. The purpose of the military departments’ core values is to clarify expectations and behaviors as a means

of addressing toxic leadership. The military departments need to reinforce a culture that truly reflects the highest standards of values-based behavior. This means that members not only refrain from disrespecting each other but that they also demonstrate the highest respect for each other; that they not only give the appearance of selfless service as they pursue personal benefits but that they also serve to empower others’ success, even if they receive nothing in return; and that they also hold each other accountable. Additionally, the DOD needs to institutionalize a performance evaluation system that includes assessment of a leader’s personal practice of core values, especially his or her ability to reinforce respectful engagement among team members.

The DOD needs to give serious attention to the quality of both the practice of leadership and the leaders in its ranks. It cannot assume that leaders know how to treat others with dignity and respect and how to reinforce those values in their organizations. It cannot continue to tolerate, dismiss, or ignore toxic behaviors and the resulting cost. While toxic leaders are often personally highly skilled, talented, and productive, they tax the self-esteem and commitment of the members of their teams placing at risk team performance and security. The high costs and waste demonstrated by this model indicate a significant adverse impact on the safety of the force and the security of the nation. Therefore, by tolerating toxic leaders and failing to employ interventions, the DOD places personnel, as well as the mission, at risk. Force protection and national security require that the U.S. military develop, promote, and provide leaders who obtain results but in ways that treat others with dignity and respect and facilitate trust. ■

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not an official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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