U.S. Army, Toxic Followership, and the Balance of Responsibility

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The role of the senior leaders was no longer that of controlling puppet master, but rather of an empathetic crafter of culture.
—Gen. Stanley McChrystal, 2015

In 1996, Marcia Whicker first coined the term "toxic leader" to describe bosses who harm rather than improve their organizations.[1] Since that time, "toxic leader" has become a part of every soldier's lexicon. To explain the poor and unethical behavior of some units, the Army scrutinizes the actions of leaders in those organizations, and the root cause is the same—toxic leadership.

Over the last decade, many senior leaders were relieved of command because the Army deemed them toxic.[2] From this viewpoint, the expression of unethical, poor behavior manifests through the follower, but the source of the problem is often the leader. These incidents create a perception that a leadership problem exists within the Army, but could there be cases where toxic
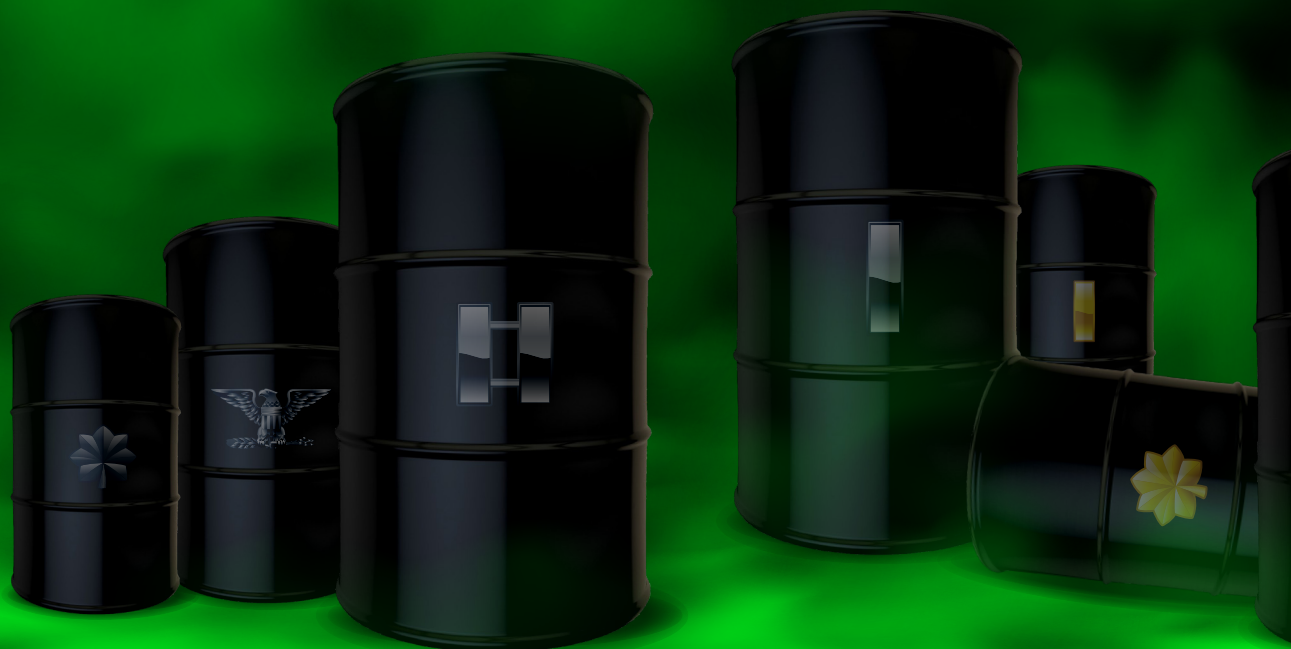
followership is to blame? Could the real problem be toxic followers? If so, what are the causes of toxic followership in the Army? Is bad leadership the primary reason for toxic followership? It is my experience that there are other elements outside of what a leader does or does not do that contribute to toxicity in Army organizations.

Framing the Problem

The Army teaches every soldier to be a leader. Over time, the words "leadership" and "leader" became synonymous, and a perception developed that to be a follower was not a noble endeavor and what mattered was to learn how to be a good leader. Thus, a newly minted Army professional begins his or her career striving "to provide purpose, direction, and motivation in order to accomplish the mission and improve the organization."[3] However, all leaders must learn to be followers as well. In order to truly be well rounded, leaders must be able to transition between leadership and followership.

As that Army professional continues his or her leadership education, he or she is taught lessons on organizational failures through historical vignettes. Classroom discussions ensue, and students invariably solve the organizational mystery and learn that the cause of the failure is toxic leadership. The takeaway is to learn how to be a good leader and how not to be toxic; these behaviors are how we improve the organization.

However, no matter how well-intentioned or how capable a leader is, there are instances where a follower's bias causes that follower to work against a leader and, in so doing, harms the organization. There are also environmental factors outside the control of both a leader or follower that contribute to toxicity.[4]

To date, most research addresses toxicity from a leader perspective. Even when considering the aspects of the follower or environment, studies describe those perspectives as elements the leader uses to achieve leader aims. Most research studies do not see the environment or followers as potential sources of toxicity.

An example of this is Art Padilla, Robert Hogan, and Robert B. Kaiser's study on the toxic triangle. In that study, the authors describe the toxic triangle as "a confluence of leader, follower, and environmental factors that make destructive leadership possible."[5] The follower and the environment are not toxic, but they make it possible for the leader to be toxic. In this model, the follower assumes the role of passive acquiescence or active participant in the toxic behavior of the leader and therefore frees the follower of responsibility.

Why Only Leaders Are Viewed as the Cause of Toxicity

For as I take it, universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom of the history of the great men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones … all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result … of thoughts that dwell in the great men sent into the world.

—Thomas Carlyle[6]

The "great man" theory of leadership helps explain why the focus of most research on leadership is from the perspective of the leader.

The current trend of laying responsibility for toxicity on the leader stems from the theory of the great man. The quality of the relationship between leader and follower; the conditions of the environment where the dyadic relationship operates in; failure or success; and toxicity or cohesion are all byproducts of the leader's actions. We see this view in Army doctrine. Army Techniques Publication 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squad,* states, "The platoon leader … is responsible for all the platoon does or fails to do."[7] In an Army platoon, success or failure falls solely on the platoon leader.

Current research on followership helps to balance the responsibility of leadership across all elements of the leadership triad and accentuates the need to study leadership from all perspectives.

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Leadership and Toxicity

The latest Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession,* introduces the term "counterproductive leadership" to describe a toxic leader and defines the term as "the demonstration of leader behaviors that violate one or more of the Army's core leader competencies or Army Values, preventing a climate conducive to mission accomplishment."[8] Competencies and attributes are what an Army leader should be, are what the leader should know, and are what a leader should do.

Violating any of the competencies and attributes results in counterproductive or toxic leadership. The Army helps us to further understand counterproductive leadership by defining it and providing examples (see table 1, page 103).[9] With these definitions and examples, students of leadership have a clear way to help identify toxic leaders and associated behaviors.

"Follower-Sheep" and Followership

The traditional view of followers is that they are dependent on the leader, have no power, are passive, and are susceptible. The terms "follower" and "follower-sheep" are synonymous, and a label of follower-sheep means someone who blindly follows even if led off a cliff.[10] This classic perspective carries with it a negative connotation, but followership theory has begun to change this view and has redefined what it means to be a follower.

> Followership is not merely the actions of a subordinate who accepts and obeys the dictates of the organizational authority figures. Therefore, followership is not the same as following. Following is impelled (consciously or unconsciously influenced) by actions of leaders. Following is reactive. In contrast, followership is a priori choice (self-conscious) of the individual in the context of his or her relationship to the nominal leader.[11]

Susan Baker's review of the followership literature confirms that followers are more than just follower-sheep; followers exercise followership. She identified four main themes regarding followership and followers.[12] An adapted version of those four main themes suggests that (1) leaders and followers are roles, not innate dispositions; (2) followers exhibit behaviors that are in their self-interest; (3) followers and leaders both benefit from the leader-follower dynamic; and (4) followers and leaders are in fact in a partnership.[13] It appears that followers do have power, are active, and make a conscious choice to exercise followership.

Followership and Toxicity

Merriam-Webster defines followership as "the ability or willingness to follow a leader."[14] The definition implies

that followership is a competency or skill and that a person can be good or bad at followership. If true, how does one evaluate productive or toxic followership? What defines toxic followership?

In the article "What is Toxic Followership?," Ted Thomas, Kevin Gentzler, and Robert Salvatorelli use Robert Kelley's follower typology to describe toxic behaviors associated with each type of Kelley's follower types. Kelley's categories fall within two scales: the first measures independent, critical thinking, and the second measures active behavior. Five behavior types thus emerge:

- *Sheep* only do what is asked and no more. They are uninterested and fall under the passive and dependent, uncritical thinking category.
- *Yes-people* are similar to sheep, but their interest is in pleasing the boss. These followers are active and dependent, uncritical thinkers.
- *Alienated followers* are independent, critical thinkers but are unmotivated or disgruntled and therefore passive in their behavior.
- *Survivors* are in the center of both measures and focus on maintaining what they have; they will change behavior as needed to survive.
- *Effective followers* are ideal because they are well-adjusted and responsible. This type of follower is active and an independent, critical thinker.[15]

Thomas, Gentzler, and Salvatorelli believe that four of the five follower types exhibit toxic behaviors under certain conditions, and they relate the toxic behaviors to reasons for those behaviors and how those behaviors relate to the leader-follower dynamic (see table 2, page 104).[16] In

Table 1. Counterproductive Leadership

Behavior	Definition	Examples
Abusive	Exceeding the boundaries of authority by being abusive, cruel, or degrading of others	Bullying, berating others for mistakes, creating conflict, ridiculing others
Self-serving	Act in ways that seek primarily to accomplish their own goals and needs before those of others	Displaying arrogance, taking credit for others' work, insisting on having their way, displaying narcissistic tendencies
Erratic	Poor self-control or volatility that drives the leader to act erratically or unpredictably	Blaming others, deflecting responsibility, losing temper at the slightest provocation, insecurity, or being unapproachable
Incompetent	Results from a lack of experience or willful neglect. Incompetence can include failure to act or acting poorly	Unengaged leadership, being passive or reactionary, neglecting leadership responsibilities, failing to communicate expectations clearly
Corrupt	Violate explicit Army standards, regulations, or policies	Dishonesty, misusing government resources or time, creating a hostile work environment, Equal Employment Opportunity and Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention violations

(Table by author; adapted from Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 8-8)

the end, all of these toxic follower behaviors work against the organization, negatively affect morale, and place the "organization's survival at risk."[17]

The U.S. Army and Followership

U.S. Army doctrine states that leadership is the relationship between the leader, the led, and the situation.[18]

In addition, "being an effective follower requires the same attributes and competencies required to be an effective leader, although application is different."[19] ADP 6-22 mentions followership twice but does not define it, and it does not include a discussion on toxic followership or what toxic follower behaviors are. A gap exists in U.S. doctrine.

Follower Strategic Behavior

Birgit Schyns, Barbara Wisse, and Stacey Sanders identified that follower research follows two main points of view. The first is the follower-sheep view; the second is from the positive aspects of followers or focused on defining what good followers are.[20] Kent Bjugstad et al. write that the modern follower is not motivated by what the follower thinks the leader wants but by what the follower wants. However, "What if followers are guided by the wrong values, lack a moral compass, and compassion for others and use their positions as followers to pursue their own goals?"[21]

Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders' research seeks to answer this question by focusing on the dark triad traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (see table 3, page 105). These three traits prevent team building and negatively affect organizations when the follower's desires are not in line with the organization or leader. Followers with these traits will work against the organization or leader if doing so leads to the achievement of their personal goals.

The dark triad is a constellation of three socially aversive, partly overlapping traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The three traits are all characterized by the tendency to influence others for selfish gains. They are associated with an instrumental approach to people and organizations, and they correlate positively with disagreeableness.[22]

Since leaders are the focus of toxicity, Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders posit that it is possible that followers who exhibit dark triad traits may be overlooked and might be getting away with their "shady strategic behavior."[23] Additionally, by not considering these behaviors in subordinates, the opportunity to fully understand toxicity is missed.

The Toxic Triangle and Choosing to Follow

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser introduced the concept of the toxic triangle. The authors recognize that leadership of any type springs from the interplay of an individual's motivation to lead,

Table 2. Toxic Follower Types and Behaviors

Follower type	Interaction with leader	Toxic behavior	Reason for behavior
Survivor	Uses a leader to gauge the environment and adapts to it	Influences the leader to do the wrong thing	Maintain the status quo at all costs to maintain position
Alienated	Irreconcilable disagreements with the leader	Actively works to undermine the leader	Loses faith in the leader or system; believe they know better
Sheep	Blind followers	Engage in immoral, unethical, or illegal behavior	Diffuse responsibility; are merely following orders
Yes-man	Blind followers	Engage in immoral, unethical, or illegal behavior	Please the boss or organization to get ahead

(Table by author; adapted from Ted A. Thomas, Kevin Gentzler, and Robert Salvatorelli, "What Is Toxic Followership?," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 10, no. 3 [Fall 2016]: 62–65)

Table 3. Dark Triad of Followers

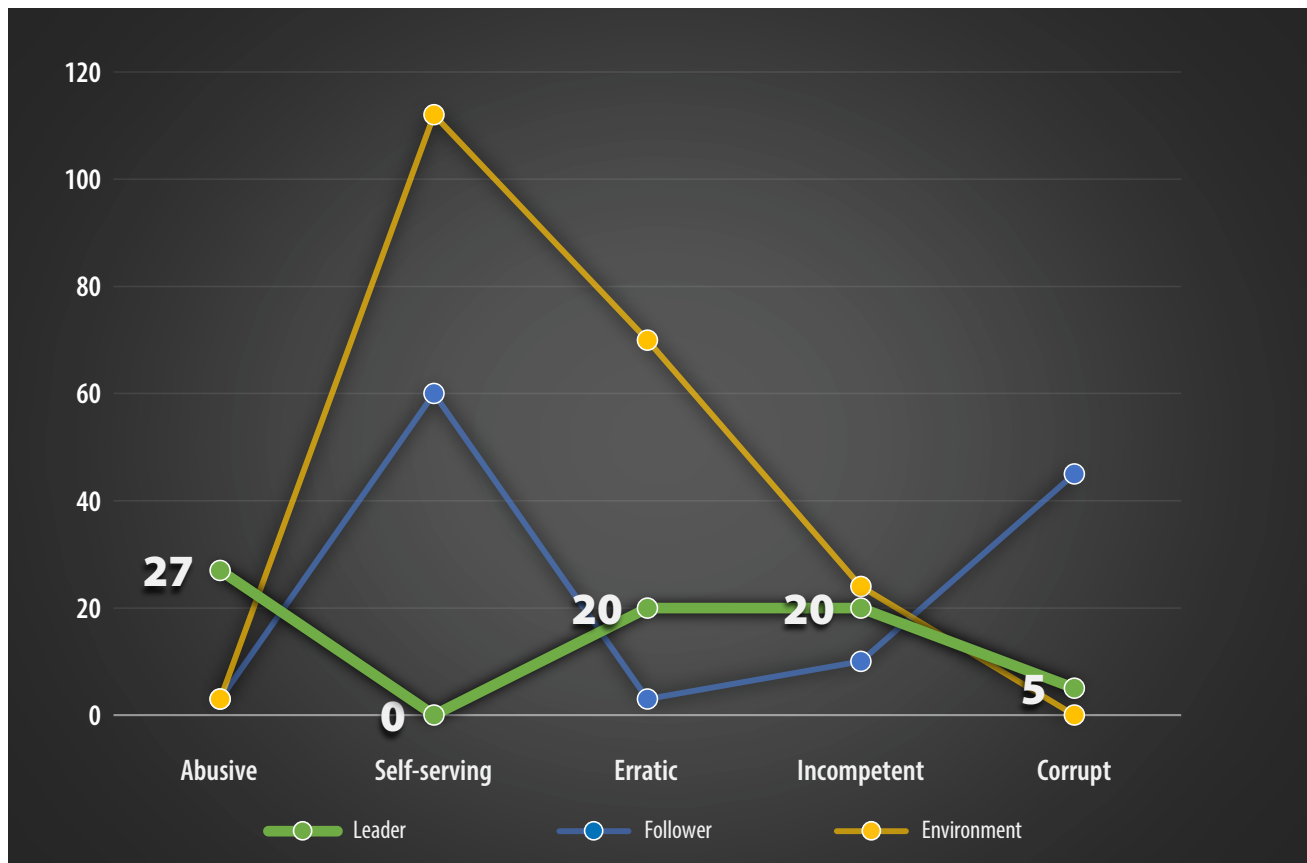| Trait type	Definition	Red-flag behavior	Additional notes
Narcissism	Narcissists think that everything that happens around them—in fact, everything that others say and do—is, or should be, about them.	1. Showing behavior in ways that serve to promote themselves 2. Aggressive after negative feedback and devaluing feedback source 3. Treating members differently based on who adds value to their positive self-views	1. Appear to have a higher likelihood of being selected as leaders 2. Need to shine and outshine others
Machiavellianism	Characterized by cynical and misanthropic beliefs, callousness, a striving for agentic goals (e.g., money, power, and status), and the use of cunning influence tactics	1. Demonstrating a self-oriented perspective with a "choose your battles" mindset 2. Actively engaging in behaviors that function to control others or minimize their influence 3. Making use of manipulation tactics to reach strategic goals	1. In contrast to narcissists, they do not necessarily have to be the center of attention 2. They are also not impulsive (in contrast to psychopaths) and act in a calculating manner
Psychopathy	Characterized by a short-term focus, a penchant for lying, social disinhibition, recklessness, fearlessness, and bold behavior; can be perceived as charismatic due to their impressive management skills	1. Choosing competition over cooperation 2. Making fast decisions without accounting for the possible negative consequences 3. Bullying or criticizing coworkers to redirect attention	1. Are likely to make choices that make them look superior and others inferior 2. Impulsive decision-makers

(Table by author; adapted from Birgit Schyns, Barbara Wisse, and Stacey Sanders, "Shady Strategic Behavior: Recognizing Strategic Followership of Dark Triad Followers," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 33, no. 2 [May 2019]: 234–49)

subordinates' desire for direction and authority, and events calling for leadership. This view is constant with a systems perspective focusing on the confluence of leaders, followers, and circumstances rather than just the characteristics of individual leaders.[24]

The authors go on to describe each of the three domains. They describe the follower as either a conformer to the leader's toxic behavior or a colluder to the behavior, and the environment as supporting a toxic leader and not as a source of toxicity. Implied is that the leader receives a higher weight; the follower and environment contribute to toxicity only passively. Their model is top focused; that is to say, the leader is the only source of toxicity.

Raymond W. Cox III, Gregory K. Plagens, and Keba Sylla offer a different view on the follower's role in this triangle: "Followers are in control of

120

100

80

60

40

27

20   **20**

20

0

0

5

Abusive   Self-serving   Erratic   Incompetent   Corrupt

Leader   Follower   Environment
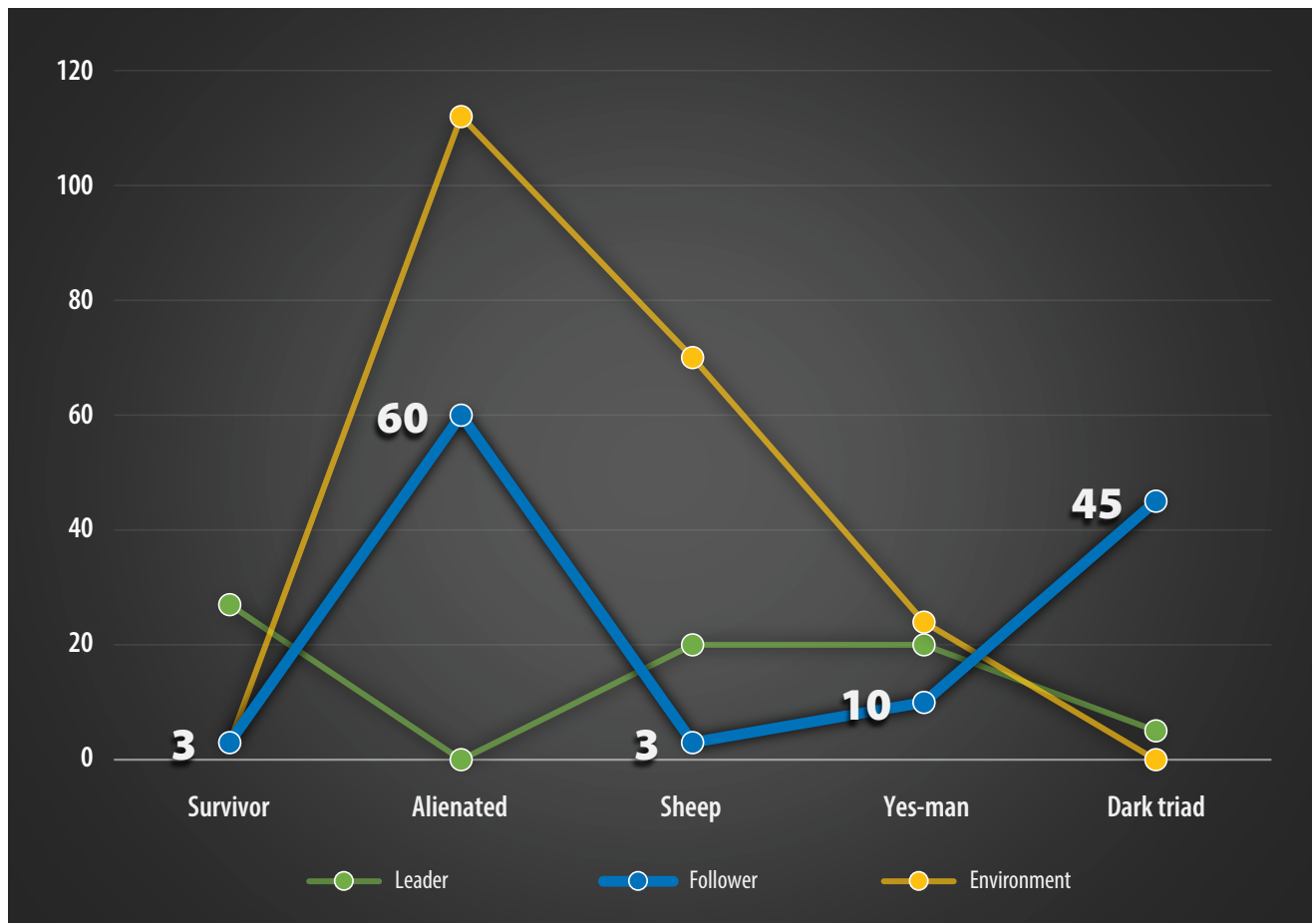
(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Leader Data

the situation by the choices made. Therefore, organizational success is in the hands of followers."[25] The authors differentiate between following and followership. Following is synonymous with follower-sheep; followership, on the other hand, is a choice to act in a way that either contributes to or inhibits organizational success.[26] A follower will choose to behave positively if the power distance is accepted, the follower shares values with the leader, and the leader uses the appropriate leadership approach based on the followers' needs (power distance in this context is defined as the imbalance of power between two people or entities).[27]

Other scholars such as Ariel Blair and Michelle Bligh propose that followers would be less likely to exhibit active followership in an environment of high-power distance. They argue that certain cultures and societies are more open to follower dynamism

and a "greater range of acceptable follower role definition."[28] One could say that U.S. society is less tolerant of power distance, and this would reflect in the members that make up the U.S. Army.

Second, followers interpret and react to leaders differently. A leader's behavior may have one meaning for or effect on one follower and an opposite purpose or effect on another. Bjugstad et al. highlight that followers "look for leaders whose values matched their own."[29] Their article identifies two categories of leader: task-oriented and interpersonal-oriented. If a follower is a task-oriented follower, he or she will relate to and see a task-oriented leader positively. If a follower is interpersonal-oriented, he or she will view the same leader negatively.

Third, Bjugstad et al. conclude that matching a leader's style (participating, selling, delegating, and telling) to the follower's style or category (alienated, exemplary,

(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Follower Data

passive, conformist, or pragmatist) will improve the leader-follower dynamic. They state, "Leaders should become more effective because their improved understanding of the follower-leader relationship."[30]

Although Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's toxic triangle is leader-focused, it is useful to us because the model introduces the idea that toxicity is a result of the interactions between leaders, followers, and the environment.[31] Their triangle serves as a prism that students of leadership can look through, turn in different directions, and examine toxicity from different perspectives.

A Diagnostic Tool

When analyzing toxicity, it is useful to attempt to diagnose it. How does one take a systemic approach when trying to figure out where toxicity is coming from

and why? The literature does not identify a toxicity diagnostic tool a leader can use to help identify the source or to potentially identify red flags for each element of the leadership triad early enough to intervene and prevent the disintegration of a team. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's toxic triangle offers a great start.

Data Collection

To answer the questions posed at the start of this article, I collected data from documentation evidence found in Jim Frederick's *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death.*[32] The data was categorized based on Priori codes or toxic indicators. Using information from the literature review, I developed definitions and indicators for toxic behaviors for each element of the leadership triad (see figure 1, page 106;
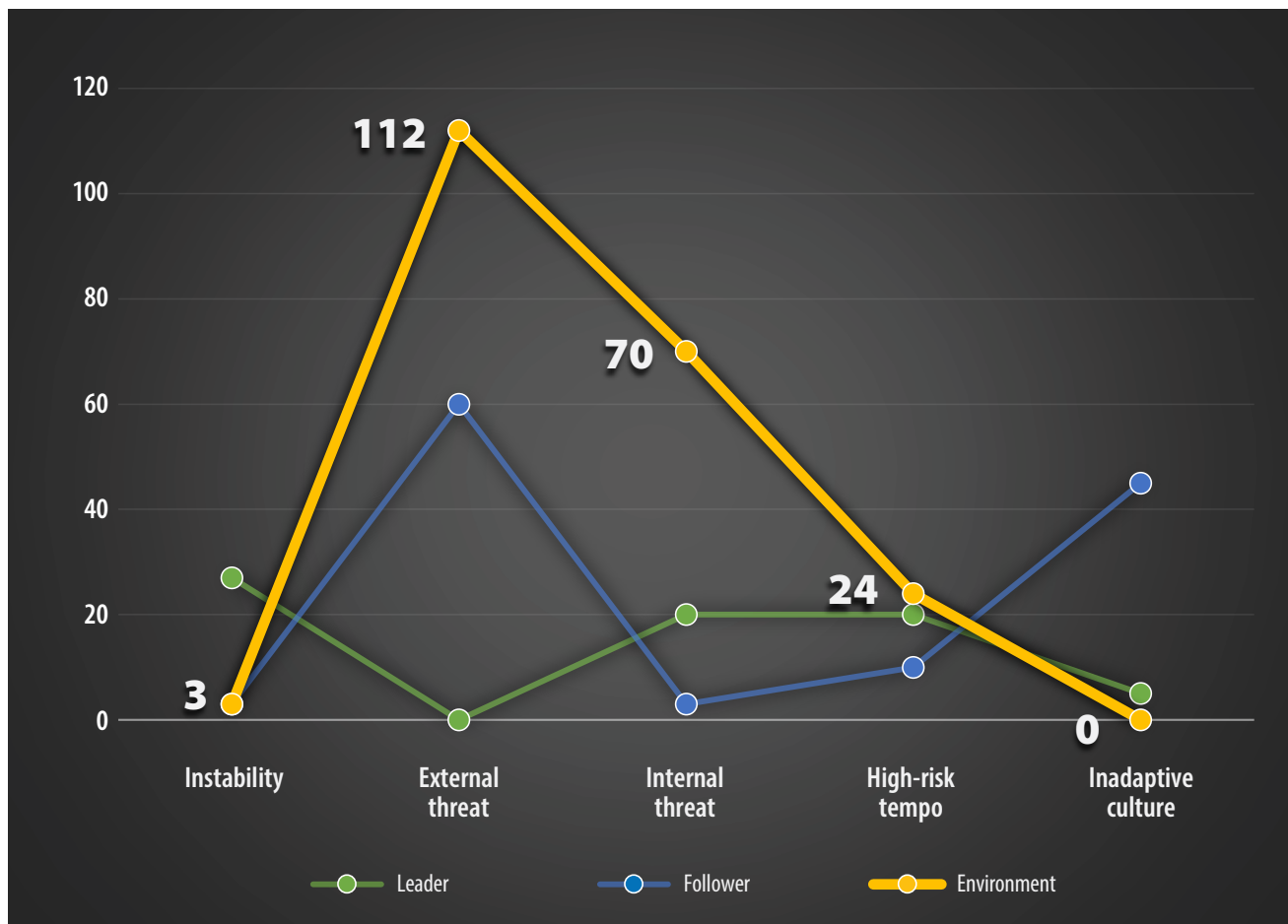
Figure 3. Environment Data

(Figure by author)

Data Analysis

figure 2, page 107; and figure 3).[33] I then used the case data to identify the frequency of toxic indicators for each element of the leadership triad.

I developed indicators to compare against the data in the case using the Army's definitions and associated behaviors for a counterproductive leader; Thomas, and Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders' descriptions of toxic follower behaviors and dark triad followers; and Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's toxic triangle and other sources. I examined the data for the presence of all indicators and tallied the frequency of each (see figure 4, page 109).

Data Analysis

The study identified two leading causes of toxic followership in the Army. The first is *abusive and*

incompetent leadership. The actions of the leader can either mitigate toxic behavior in followers or aggravate them. Abusive or incompetent leader behaviors, in some instances, activate toxic follower behaviors.

The second cause is *external and internal environmental threats*. The environment, not bad leadership, proved to be the largest source of toxicity in this study and had the most substantial impact on follower toxicity. The unpredictability and constant presence of an external threat proved to be more than anyone could cope with and generated conditions for dark triad behaviors to surface.

Through the research, I observed that individuals are not easily categorized according to Kelley's and the U.S. Army's toxic leader or toxic follower typologies, respectively. A follower may demonstrate

alienated or sheep toxic behaviors, but the follower is not easily categorized as one or the other; however, their actions are. The focus on defining behaviors instead of defining individuals is crucial because behaviors can be modified.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the sources of follower toxicity. To accomplish this, I focused on describing sources of follower toxicity in Army organizations by examining leader, follower, and environmental toxicity to show how each element contributes to the phenomenon.

It is essential to recognize that toxicity is not something unique to leaders. The follower and environment play significant roles in contributing to

linked to the Army's leadership requirements model would help make an essential differentiation.

Future research could focus on the following areas:

- Defining followership within the context of the Army and reexamining the relationship between leaders and followers through the lens of followership theory
- Developing an Army followership requirements model that complements and links to the Army leadership requirements model
- Examining a differentiation between the leader and follower as roles and leadership and followership as behaviors both leaders and followers express
- Conducting a multiple-case study to confirm or deny the Priori codes identified in this study
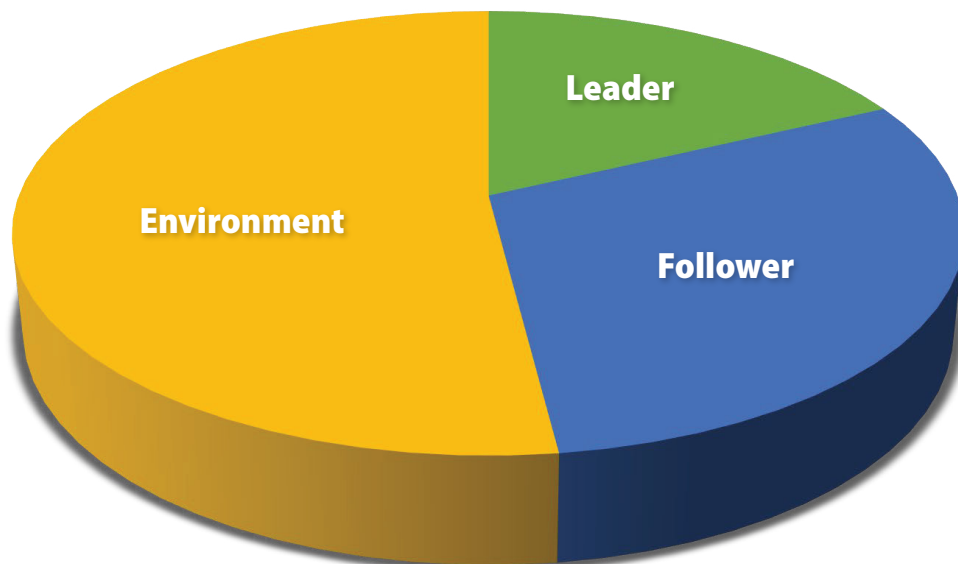
Army doctrine must expand beyond toxicity or counterproductive behaviors in leaders to include followers and environmental factors. By focusing only on the leader, the Army misses an opportunity to attack toxicity from different angles, and a multipronged approach is more likely to have a more significant effect.

The study focused on each element of the leadership triad individually to identify sources of toxic followership. However, it became clear that all three aspects are inextricably linked, and this relational interplay is worthy of further examination. I found that toxicity is like a weed,

(Figure by author)

Figure 4. Leadership Triad Contributions to Toxicity

organizational toxicity. Therefore, the Army should study followership and define the qualities of a good follower. ADP 6-22 states that "being an effective follower requires the same attributes and competencies required to be an effective leader"; this is not in line with followership theory.[34] A set of complementary attributes and competencies unique to followers but

and if fed, the weed grows to strangle the organization. The weed feeds off toxic leader and follower behaviors and toxic environmental characteristics.

By understanding how leaders, followers, and the environment feed this weed, individuals at all levels can work to reduce toxicity, especially follower toxicity, in Army organizations. ■

Notes

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17. Ibid.
18. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-8.
19. Ibid., 1-10.
20. Schyns, Wisse, and Sanders, "Shady Strategic Behavior."
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32. Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (New York: Crown/Archetype, 2010), 43.
33. Using information from the literature review, definitions and indicators were developed for toxic behaviors for each element of the leadership triad.
34. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession,* 1-19.