



1st Place 2014-2 MacArthur Contest Winner

(Photo by Ronald Toland Jr., U.S. Army Garrison Ansbach)

Ready...Aim...Spray? Spc. Michael McNeill closes his eyes in grim anticipation as a Sgt. Miles Seekford sprays him directly in the face. The two, along with their fellow soldiers from the 516th Military Police Augmentation Platoon, underwent firsthand experience with the effects of pepper spray during training 12-13 January 2011 in Katterbach, Germany.

Great Results Through Bad Leaders

The Positive Effects of Toxic Leadership

Maj. Kane David Wright, Australian Army

I tell you, therefore, as officers, that you will neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, nor smoke, nor even sit down until you have personally seen that your men have done those things. If you will do this for them, they will follow you to the end of the world. And, if you do not, I will break you.

—Lt. Gen. Sir William Slim, KCB, CB, DSO, MC

Transformational leadership is great, and toxic leadership is terrible; it is that simple, right? Historical examples abound of leaders who put service and sacrifice above all else, and the contrasting leaders who destroy their subordinates' morale in the pursuit of self-advancing goals. For every Dick Winters, there is a Herbert Sobel; for every Sam Damon, a Courtney Massengale.¹ There is a tendency in both popular literature and professional military discussion to categorize our leaders into polar extremes due to the consequences that flow from their actions: transformational leaders produce positive results to be emulated—in contrast to toxic leaders who destroy units and should be excised for the good of the organization. Almost excluded from consideration, however, are those circumstances under which an organization can emerge from toxic leadership not only intact but also stronger as a result. This essay seeks to posit the question: Can toxic leadership ever be a good thing? In addressing this question, this essay will utilize a case study of an Australian army engineer company's experience to demonstrate the circumstances under which toxic leadership can enhance organizational performance.

Toxic Leadership in Context

The toxic leader concept has been debated with increasing frequency in both military circles and private business in the twenty-first century. While proponents of the concept generally agree that a toxic leader displays destructive leadership, there is less consensus on the specific impacts of a toxic leader's behavior.² Lt. Gen. Walter Ulmer points to the conclusions of U.S. Army War College faculty and student assessments to define toxic leader impacts, stating that "visible short-term mission accomplishment" is prioritized, often without consideration to "staff or troop morale and/or climate."³ The implication in this comment is that the climate fostered in the pursuit of short-term achievements will ultimately undermine long-term organizational health. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, more specifically addresses the definition of toxic leadership, describing it as "a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance."⁴ Based on this latter definition, the military professional may question that if mission performance is not affected, can the leadership

truly be toxic? Within the context of Ulmer's assertion that short-term mission accomplishment is indeed possible under toxic leadership, this essay will examine toxic leadership in the specific context of those behaviors the leader exhibits. The organizational consequences that may flow from these behaviors will therefore constitute the basis for assessment of the efficacy of toxic leadership in particular circumstances.

The leader attributes examined in this case study are based on the key elements of toxic leader syndrome framed in the 2004 *Military Review* article "Toxic Leadership" by George Reed: "an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates," "a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate," and "a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest."⁵ The instances of toxic leadership discussed in the following sections occur within the framework of these elements.

Case Study: Toxic Leadership in the Operational Support Squadron, 12th Combat Engineer Regiment

With the annual rotation of personnel associated with the 2010 posting cycle, the operational support squadron of the Australian army's 12th Combat Engineer Regiment welcomed a new squadron commander, Maj. Stolz.⁶ Stolz, a logistician, was a newly promoted major without prior command experience, and he had not previously served in an engineer regiment. Stolz' command team provided continuity for the squadron, with the key positions of squadron second-in-command, squadron sergeant major, and all three platoon commanders having served with the squadron for at least 12 months prior to his arrival. On his arrival to the unit, Stolz inherited the dual responsibilities of coordinating logistic support to the regiment while also training and preparing the operational support squadron for certification as part of the brigade's annual war fighting certification exercise. To meet the latter requirement, Stolz had approximately eight months to train and prepare the squadron.

Textbook Toxic Leadership: Stolz' Behavior

From the outset, Stolz demonstrated behaviors and attitudes consistent with those commonly attributed



(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Brice Sparks)

Australian army soldiers from the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment lay barbed wire 9 July 2009 during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2009 in Queensland, Australia. Talisman Sabre is a biennial combined training exercise designed to train Australian and U.S. forces in planning and conducting combined task force operations.

to toxic leaders. In an unfamiliar environment, he adopted a controlling—even micromanaging—approach to his leadership of the squadron. Junior leaders were disempowered from making the decisions they previously made under the authority of the former squadron commander. Stolz required even the simplest decisions regarding troop training and administration to be approved by him first, and his subordinates were expected to provide detailed back briefs on routine matters. While these actions may, at face value, appear to be indicative of a new commander simply finding his or her way in an unfamiliar organization, Stolz' actions soon extended to demonstrate other obvious examples of toxic leader attributes.

Stolz' apparent lack of concern for his subordinates' well-being became evident early in his tenure. Stolz adhered to a rigorous work schedule, which included working weekends. He implemented an internal roster for the squadron in which at least one junior officer in the squadron would be required to work on weekends to assist him "as required." When the squadron second-in-command approached Stolz after several weeks to highlight that this practice underutilized the officers and that their presence was unnecessary, Stolz

disregarded suggestions to instead place the officers "on call." He insisted that junior officers had an obligation to the unit first and that time away from work was a privilege and not a right.

This mindset extended to other aspects of unit members' work-life balance. Stolz frequently cancelled approved leave travel plans of his subordinates at late notice, justifying his decisions by highlighting the criticality of affected members to the unit. His requirement that they remain within the local area for recall on short notice resulted in several formal complaints. In one particular instance, Stolz directed an officer to cancel attendance at a close relative's wedding to attend a squadron social function. In another, a soldier missed the birth of his child to attend a squadron training week for which his position was not critical. Stolz' summarized his rationale for decisions like these in a simple mantra: "You are in *my* squadron. If I am at a squadron activity, you will be there too."

Stolz' interpersonal techniques also negatively affected the organizational climate in the squadron. Despite his lack of familiarity with the operations of an engineer logistic organization, Stolz was prone to marginalize and diminish the contributions of subject

matter experts within his organization. Living in a garrison-style neighborhood in close proximity to the regiment, Stolz developed a habit of “door knocking” at his subordinates’ houses on Saturdays and Sundays and directing immediate attendance at unscheduled planning meetings. Having removed subordinates from family activities for these meetings, he would belittle the contributions of individuals he disagreed with, following with comments like “I don’t know why I invite you to these conferences,” and “If you have someplace better to be, you better start contributing something of value or we will be here all night.” These conferences served as examples of the abrasive and narcissistic style with which Stolz engaged his subordinates.

The final toxic attribute Stolz consistently displayed was that of motivation purely on the grounds of self-interest. Squadron staff and key leaders quickly reached the consensus that he provided effort and focus only to those aspects of his work and leadership that received the direct observation of the regiment’s commanding officer. Stolz would make repeated attempts to ingratiate himself with superiors by volunteering the operational support squadron to lead or support tasks he believed would enhance his own standing in the commander’s perspective, which frequently overcommitted squadron members and resources. Stolz’ personal involvement in these activities would generally only occur if he believed that the regiment’s, or brigade’s, senior leadership would be present. In one instance, a logistic planning activity instigated by the squadron second-in-command for short-notice noncombatant evacuation contingencies, Stolz only became involved in the activity when he learned the brigade commander had chosen to attend the brief. Immediately prior to the brief, Stolz dismissed the briefing officer and then briefed the activity outline to the brigade commander as his own plan.

By contrast, when the operational support squadron was tasked to deploy on the brigade’s culminating certification activity as an enhanced logistic node to support two battle groups, Stolz abnegated his command of the squadron when he became aware that both the regiment and brigade commander would be at another location and absent from contingency planning. Stolz passed both planning responsibility and command of the squadron to a

second-year lieutenant for the activity and, instead, took a two-week skiing vacation at Australia’s Thredbo Ski Resort.

Taken in isolation, the examples cited previously paint a picture of Stolz as a narcissistic and obtuse leader of almost cartoonlike proportions. Although it is clear that Stolz displayed a notable lack of emotional awareness and empathy for subordinates, the intent of the illustrations provided are not to vilify the officer or categorize him as an irredeemable failure of a leader. His toxic approach was not one of intention; in individual conversation with peers on his approach to leadership, he consistently reaffirmed that his method was building a strong team and was effective for the performance of the squadron. However, how these actions actually impacted organizational performance warrants examination.

Success Due To, and Despite, Leadership

With the available evidence of Stolz’ actions, it is easy to predict the most likely outcome for the operational support squadron’s organizational climate and performance. Drawing on Joe Doty and Jeff Fenlason’s description of toxic leader impacts, at best, this approach should have engendered a climate that endured Stolz’ leadership until his tenure reached its’ end. At worst, his actions could have damaged esprit de corps, initiative, and drive amongst the members and junior leadership of the organization.⁷ In practice, however, his actions produced a third, unexpected effect: the operational support squadron grew as an organization, developed stronger cohesion among its members, and actually improved its long-term mission readiness and performance.

Stolz’ actions primarily served as a galvanizing force for the junior and middle leadership of the squadron. In the face of a demanding and emotionally immature commander, leaders at all levels banded together to mitigate the impacts of his leadership style. To meet the unrealistic work and output expectations Stolz held, officers and their noncommissioned officers were required to cooperate on a level not previously demanded of the squadron. Platoons overburdened with direct taskings by Stolz compensated by task-sharing with other platoons, which would then reciprocate when Stolz’ focus for task allocation shifted.

Platoon command teams solidified as noncommissioned officers assumed greater responsibilities to alleviate the workload of overtaxed lieutenants. In the process, both members would enhance their personal relationship, professional knowledge, and understanding of each other's roles, becoming a more effective team. These bonds—at the small team, intra-platoon, and inter-platoon levels—would ultimately engender a level of esprit de corps in the face of Stolz' overbearing leadership style that established the squadron as an extremely close-knit group for several years following Stolz' departure. The three platoon commanders, sergeant major, and squadron second-in-command have remained in very close contact since departing the unit. To the obvious surprise of officers familiar with Stolz' style, the squadron developed a reputation within the regiment for its high morale.

Stolz' self-interested motivation had the further unanticipated effect of enhancing the professional aptitude and knowledge of members throughout the squadron. His willingness to volunteer the squadron for excessive taskings and planning activities, coupled with his proclivity to avoid personal involvement, effectively placed his subordinates in a "sink or swim" situation of professional development. In the example of the lieutenant tasked to plan and command the squadron's deployment in support of the brigade certification exercise, Stolz' conspicuous absence forced the lieutenant and his peers to seek out the information and agencies they required to prepare the squadron for its deployment. The experience gained in performing a role two ranks higher than he was formally trained for provided the lieutenant invaluable exposure to command and leadership.

Finally, Stolz' approach to leadership indirectly served as a forcing mechanism for the squadron to enhance its long-term operational preparedness. In light of his tendency to continually overcommit the squadron to taskings that enhanced his own profile, squadron leaders sought to better anticipate the possible tasks that they could be assigned. The squadron second-in-command and sergeant major implemented a review of mission essential tasks and directed capabilities the squadron was responsible to provide and then, in concert with platoon staff, implemented an equipment remediation program to address deficiencies and procure new capability-enhancing equipment.

Throughout this process, Stolz did not involve himself, nor provide any guiding direction, but simply warned the squadron leadership that if their "pet projects" jeopardized any tasking, repercussions would follow. Though clearly not his intentional aim, his actions indirectly contributed toward a level of stewardship by the squadron's leadership to preserve the future operational capability of the organization. The utility of this measure was validated when the squadron later deployed on short notice in December 2010 to provide disaster relief in the Indian Ocean. The unit received a commendation for distinguished performance for its rapid initial response and performance while deployed.

The behaviors exhibited by Stolz throughout his command cannot be misconstrued—they were undeniably toxic. The impact they had on the organization, however, deviates from the traditionally expected results of toxic leadership. His immediate subordinates in the chain of command grew professionally and personally in response to his leadership style. The operational support squadron succeeded both despite, and as a direct result of, the toxic leadership exercised by Stolz.

Contingent Circumstances Are Critical

The success of toxic leadership in enhancing organizational performance is contingent on several factors. Situational context is paramount when examining an isolated case, and that of the 12th Engineer Regiment is no exception. First, continuity of staff played a role. Individuals in key positions had familiarity with the organization, hence, they could compensate for a lack of direction and guidance from Stolz by relying on a relative level of prior experience. As an extension of this, the interpersonal familiarity of Stolz' subordinate staff set the conditions for the group to unite as a team. These individuals possessed a shared work ethic predisposed to collaboration and cooperation. Had junior leaders been present who lacked this ethic or shared Stolz' ambitious worldview, it is less likely that the command team would have functioned so well. Finally, the existing environment of the operational support squadron supported a strong culture of professionalism and high performance that ensured the members of the squadron remained focused on effective performance of their jobs, even in the face of poor leadership. To draw from Padilla, et al's "toxic triangle," the operational support squadron's situational context lacked both the susceptible followers and conducive environments



(Image courtesy of the U.S. Army)

necessary to truly enable Stolz to impact the squadron as a destructive leader.⁸

Does Toxic Leadership Have a Place in the Military?

The 12th Engineer Regiment case study highlights a situation in which an organization and its members actually benefited from toxic leadership. However, to infer from this that there is a place for toxic leadership in the military is to miss the point. Toxic leadership is not an effective leadership style for managing subordinates, and it can frequently produce disastrous results. To assume that all leaders will recognize the elements of toxic leadership and consciously avoid their application is naïve. Some leaders do not recognize the characteristics in their own behaviors; some misconstrue them for other, desirable, leadership characteristics; and the most

dangerous recognize but simply do not care that they display toxic leadership.

Conclusion

The key argument in this article is this: when faced with toxic leadership, it is possible to preserve the organization and its individuals, and emerge stronger.

Giving due consideration to the circumstances in the operational support squadron that made unit growth possible, Stolz' toxic leadership cannot be overlooked as the galvanizing force that stimulated a level of cooperation not previously demanded of the command team. His approach unintentionally forced his subordinates to develop themselves professionally, and his practice of assigning excessive tasking indirectly engendered a sense of stewardship in his subordinates that enhanced operational capability.

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Notes

Epigraph. Frank Owen, "General Bill Slim," *Phoenix, The South East Asia Command Magazine*, 1945. Address to the officers of the 11th East African Division on the Imphal Plain, 1944. This comment illustrates that an effective leader must, above all else, demonstrate concern for his or her soldiers' welfare. At face value, a naïve subordinate of Slim's may have incorrectly associated these comments with the traits of a toxic leader; however, Slim's stern warning to his officers concerning their responsibility to take care of their soldiers fundamentally demonstrates just the opposite.

1. Dick Winters and Herbert Sobel were officers in Company E, 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, popularized in the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Sobel was a strict disciplinarian, greatly disliked by his men, while Winters was well liked and highly respected. Sam Damon and Courtney Massengale are fictional characters from Anton Myer's novel *Once an Eagle*. Damon is portrayed as an honorable soldier, while Massengale is depicted as corrupt, ambitious, and conniving.

2. George E. Reed and Richard A. Olsen, "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux," *Military Review* (November-December 2010): 58.

3. Walter F. Ulmer Jr., "Toxic Leadership: What Are We Talking About?" *Army* (June 2012): 50.

4. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 10 September 2012), 3.

5. George E. Reed, "Toxic Leadership," *Military Review* (July-August 2004): 67-68.

6. For comparative purposes, an Australian army engineer regiment is equivalent in size and organization to a U.S. Army engineer battalion. The operational support squadron within this organization is roughly equivalent in size and capability to a forward support company and comprises all organic logistic capabilities required to support and sustain the engineer battalion. For purposes of confidentiality, unit designations, dates, and names have been changed. All other details and incidents described remain factual.

7. Joe Doty and Jeff Fenlason, "Narcissism and Toxic Leaders," *Military Review* (January-February 2013): 55.

8. Art Padilla, Robert Hogan and Robert B. Kaiser, "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers, and Conducive Environments," *The Leadership Quarterly* 18 (2007): 180. In this article, the authors argue that destructive leaders must be enabled by other factors to have a significant detrimental impact on the organization to which they belong. The first enabler is susceptible followers, in the form of either conformers that have unmet needs or low maturity, or colluders who hold bad values, ambition, or similar world-views to the leader. The second enabler is conducive environments, characterized by instability, cultural values, and a lack of checks and balances.

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