



From Toxic to Tonic

Emotional Intelligence for the Toxic Leader

Mr. Gerald Sewell

“The Army will produce professional leaders that practice the mission command philosophy whether conducting unified land operations or Army generating force functions. These leaders possess emotional intelligence and achieve credibility with external JIIM partners, allies, internal agencies, and stakeholders.”

--The Army Leader Development Strategy 2013, p.6

So, what is emotional intelligence and why does the Army need it? Dr. Daniel Goleman, science reporter, psychologist, and author writes, in his 1998 book *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, “Emotional intelligence is the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and our relationships.” The “capacity” Dr. Goleman is speaking of are the very skills that make leaders successful. What the Army has long referred to as interpersonal tact and interpersonal skills are in fact the skills and competencies of emotional intelligence; the critical skills that are the key to being successful Army leaders.

Emotional intelligence and the lack thereof are at the root of the current crisis in Military leadership - the level of toxicity in too many of its leaders. This article examines the importance of Emotional intelligence in general for army leaders and focuses on its value to reducing if not eliminating toxic leadership.

The Army’s Leader Development Strategy 2013 (ALDS 2013) is correct in identifying the need for Army leaders to be emotionally intelligent. Emotional intelligence should be an integral part of the Army’s leader development program. Embracing the attributes and skills of emotional intelligence are critical to all

aspects of a leader’s development, particularly in the leadership domains of self-awareness, social understanding, and applying influence. Emotional intelligence increases the probability of leader effectiveness and successful organizations. Leaders who understand the value of emotional intelligence and possess higher levels of this trait, are more effective leaders. Emotional intelligence enables the understanding of the social skills necessary to discern and apply the appropriate influence techniques in the variety of situations and contexts leaders must face. Emotional intelligence also facilitates the ability to establish mutually beneficial relationships. Dan Goleman writes in a 2004 edition of the Harvard Business review, “I have found, however, that the most effective leaders are alike in one crucial way: They all have a high degree of what has come to be known as emotional intelligence. It’s not that IQ and technical skills are irrelevant. They do matter, but mainly as “threshold capabilities”; that is, they are the entry-level requirements for executive positions. But my research, along with other recent studies, clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won’t

make a great leader.” This also holds true for the U.S. military leaders. We place great value in the military threshold capabilities; the technical and tactical proficiency of our military leaders, and reward them accordingly with promotions and positions of increased responsibility and prestige, but we pay little attention to what really makes them successful - their ability to understand and apply the intangible skills of leadership that are represented by emotional intelligence.

As the U.S. Army continues to adjust its leader development strategy in the years ahead, if the ALDS 2013 quote is any indication, emotional intelligence will quickly become an integral part of developing Army Leaders. This article provides answers to one critical area where Army leader development can benefit from emotional intelligence. This area is illustrated in the following vignette.

The Toxic Leader

The battalion live fire exercise (LFX) had not gone as well as desired. The leadership was anxious as they prepared to brief the new brigade commander on the details of the validation training exercise. The core of the battalion’s NCO and officer leadership was comprised of solid and experienced combat veterans who

were finally coming together after a tumultuous and frenetic reset phase. In his guidance prior to the exercise, the legendary Col. M.D. “Mad Dog” Brooks, the new Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Commander, had been very direct and precise about the live-fire exercise tasks, conditions and standards he expected. He left little latitude for initiative and no margin for error. His intent was to get the unit back to the “highest level of proficiency as quickly as possible,” and everyone in the battalion understood that he was not satisfied with their current performance. Administrative and maintenance problems plagued the exercise from the beginning, and many of them contributed to the failure to achieve the exacting training timeline established by the BCT staff. Unreliable range targets, crew-served and individual weapons malfunctions, vehicle operational readiness, and delays in the ammunition draw all combined to keep the unit off-schedule from the start. Through the sheer force of the battalion’s leaders, every company completed all of the training tasks. The Observer Controllers (OC) rated their gunnery skills and fire discipline as exceptional. Although the battalion’s Soldiers and junior leaders had some significant gaps in their tactical skills, they had just proven that they could still shoot, move and communicate

like real warriors. As anticipated, the after action review (AAR) began badly. After the fourth slide, Col. Brooks' visible agitation transitioned to anger and he erupted. He retrieved a stack of index cards from his breast pocket, and summarily listed all the things the battalion had done wrong. He berated the battalion and company commanders as failures in front of everyone present. In concluding, he said, "Your leadership incompetence is exceeded only by your collective inability to meet training timelines, maintain your equipment and weapons to standards, and conduct basic range administrative procedures!" When the senior OC attempted to interject with the positive aspects of their highly successful gunnery results, Brooks immediately cut him off by stating, "Major, when I want your opinion I will ask for it. Until then, keep your mouth shut!" Not allowing the briefing to continue, Col. Brooks ordered the battalion to remain in the field until its problems were fixed. He abruptly left the briefing area, not bothering to talk further with the battalion commander or even the BCT S-3 (operations officer).

Col. Brooks, the brigade commander in our vignette, exhibits the characteristics of the classic military toxic leader. The good news is that the military, particularly, the U. S. Army has taken some serious steps to address "toxicity" in its leaders. The Army defines toxic leadership to a large degree the way retired Army Col. George Reed defined it in his article published in 2004 by Military Review. Reed believes toxic leaders all possess a combination of three key elements. These are:

1. An apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates.
2. A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate.

3. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest.

U.S. Army leadership has embraced this definition and instituted reforms in its leader evaluation systems which are designed to identify these individuals and hopefully get them to change or get them to leave. ALDS 2013 identifies the intent of these changes:

"We are also implementing 360° assessments which include input not only from superiors but also peers and subordinates. Such a system will help individual leaders identify strengths to sustain and weaknesses to eliminate."

The Toxic Impact

The problem with toxic leaders is not that they have toxic personalities, but it is the impact on others that it produces; and this is usually manifest by way of negative emotions. Dan Goleman writes in *Primal Leadership*, "Negative emotions – especially chronic anger, anxiety, or a sense of futility – powerfully disrupt work, hijacking attention from the task at hand." These negative emotions often cause distraction, and the negative moods that deter individuals from applying their best effort as fear of incurring the wrath of the toxic leader. The negative moods that accompany a toxic environment prohibit individuals from doing their best work. Constant negative pressures and attitudes cause excessive distress, which further deteriorates the performance in the work place. Studies show that U.S. industry loses millions of working days and billions of dollars each year from employee absenteeism due to stress. How does this translate in the military environment in which military personnel are not likely to experience this high absenteeism? It becomes more a case of mental and emotional absenteeism as opposed to being physically

missing from the work place. Toxic leadership acts as a strong toxin and has the potential to, as pointed out in *Primal Leadership*, poison the emotional climate of the organization. The climate that toxic leadership creates is one that is totally detrimental to effective functioning, builds negative stress and causes individuals to "check out."

The U.S. Army leadership definition calls for leaders to accomplish the mission and improve the organization. A critical part of improving the organization is developing soldiers and leaders. Toxic leaders, though often adept at accomplishing the mission, due to their deficits in emotional intelligence, fail epically at the personnel development tasks.

How Emotional Intelligence Can Help

Toxic leadership as defined by Col. Reed as a product of a lack of individual self-awareness and self-management, as well as the lack of or inattention to social awareness and relationship management skills. These four characteristics and skills represent the four domains of emotional intelligence as defined by Dr. Goleman. Goleman's domains, as summarized from *Primal Leadership*, are described below with the application to Col. Reed's three characteristics of the toxic leader.

Goleman's domains are: Self-awareness, described in short definition as the ability to read one's emotion and recognize the impact while using "gut sense" to guide decisions. Self-awareness includes the competencies of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. Toxic Leaders lack the ability to conduct self-assessments required by self-awareness, which feeds an unbalanced ego and also, according to Col. Reed's characteristics, fosters "the apparent lack of concern

for the well being of subordinates." Self-management is the second domain. It involves the controlling of one's emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances. Self-management includes the competencies of emotional self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement, initiative, and optimism. Toxic leaders often exhibit a deficit in emotional self-control as they employ, according to Col. Reed, "a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate." Social awareness the third domain is the ability to sense, understand, and react to others emotions while comprehending social networks. Social awareness includes the competencies of empathy, organizational awareness, and service. Toxic leaders are lacking in all of the competencies and behaviors of this domain. This is displayed by the toxic leader as in their self-absorption he or she is not concerned with the emotions or well being of others. The fourth and final domain is relationship management. This is the ability to inspire, influence, and develop others while managing conflict. Relationship management includes the competencies of inspirational leadership, influence, developing others, being a catalyst for change, conflict management, and teamwork/collaboration. Relationship management skills are necessary to reverse each of the toxic leader characteristics.

The first step in any personal development program is self-awareness. Leaders have to identify their developmental gaps, accept them and then design the necessary steps to growth. The Army's 360-assessment program is a great tool to help toxic leaders recognize the dangers of their toxicity and in some cases the fact that they are toxic or is perceived so by their subordinates, peers and/or superiors. Once leaders embrace this understanding, they can then begin to address the needs. The next step must

be an honest assessment of a leader's emotional intelligence skills. There are a number of emotional intelligence assessments and self-evaluation tools available to help leaders identify and measure the emotional intelligence skills they may need to develop. The ultimate goal for all leaders must be to develop or enhance their emotional intelligence skills. To this end most of the assessment tools currently available also provide a process to assist the individual in developing their emotional intelligence skills, with or without a coach/trainer.

The Army has recognized the importance of emotional intelligence in its leaders and at several levels has instituted training and awareness

in emotional intelligence. The Army's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) runs a two-hour seminar on emotional intelligence at its School for Command Preparation (SCP) for command designees at the battalion level. CGSC's Command and General Staff Officer's Course (The Majors' course) includes reference to emotional intelligence throughout its leadership curriculum, and provides a 24-hour elective course, entitled emotional intelligence for leaders. In this course, field-grade leaders discuss the application of emotional intelligence to various aspects of leadership and have the opportunity to perform an individual emotional intelligence skills assessment followed by guided

interpretation of results with development and execution of developmental action plans to enhance their emotional intelligence skills. Governor, who shared it with Coalition Forces, requesting a retaining wall be built in the area as well as have the main road in the area paved. Additional economic atmospheric suggest the opening of the road to the District Center has caused local cooking oil and tomato prices to decrease. Several shops are also stocking goods only available in the provincial capital and scattered reports indicate that a small boom in local marriages is also occurring suggesting that economic conditions are improving.

Emotional Intelligence is not magic, but...

Emotional intelligence is no magic formula, but the understanding and practice of EI by Army leaders will go a long way in promoting self-awareness and social awareness in those leaders at all levels and all Army cohorts. This will subsequently decrease the levels of toxicity in Army formations and lead to more effective leaders and more efficient organizations. The Army leadership has it right; Army leaders must possess emotional intelligence in order to lead effectively our soldiers of the future.

Mr. Gerald F. Sewell is an Assistant Professor of Military Leadership at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kan. He works in the Department of Command and Leadership and is involved in the effort to integrate emotional intelligence into the leadership curriculum. He is the author and lead instructor for the Electives course- Emotional Intelligence for Leaders, in the Command and General Staff Officer course. Sewell holds a B.A. from Bowie State University, and an M.A. from George Washington University.

Endnotes

1. Goleman, Daniel, Working With Emotional Intelligence, (Bantam Books, New York, New York 1998). P317
 2. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, Primal Leadership, (Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2002). P6.
 3. Goleman, Daniel, "What Makes a Leader", Harvard Business Review, (Nov-Dec 1998): p93-102.

4. Broaddus and McCullum, "Leader-imposed Stress in Organizations: Do You Improve Your Organization, or Detract From its Success?" USACGSOC curriculum, Lesson L106, 2014.
 5. Reed George R, "Toxic Leadership", Military Review, July-August 2004, pages 67 to 71.
 6. Army Leader Development Strategy 2013, (Headquarters Department of the Army, 2013) p.3.

7. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, P15.
 8. Zeidner, Matthews, Roberts, What we know about Emotional Intelligence, (The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2009) p.283.
 9. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, p.x.
 10. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, Army Leadership. (Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 2012.), p. 1-1.

11. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee. P39