

# Followership: Avoid being a toxic subordinate

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"A toxic subordinate is someone who exhibits mannerisms detrimental to a positive command climate, readiness, esprit de corps, and Army values, and who influences others to follow their errant lead." - Command Sgt. Major Brian M. Disque (Graphic by NCO Journal)

"Everybody has a boss." This is true for the Army; every Army leader, regardless of rank or echelon, is also a follower. The Army spends a lot of time discussing ways to develop leadership, but very rarely do we focus on how to be a good subordinate, though there are different sets of skills to be successful at both. You cannot be a great inspirational leader unless you are a great follower, but nowhere in our doctrine is there a publication with good advice on how to be a great follower.

I think the best (and only) advice given to me on followership was, "Be in the *right* place, at the

*right* time (10 minutes early), in the *right* uniform, with the *right* attitude, and everything will be ok." The Army has a leader requirements model ([https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/adp6\\_22.html](https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/adp6_22.html)) to tell me what I should be, know, and do as a leader, but lacks sufficient guidance on what and how a good follower should similarly think, act, and speak.<sup>1</sup>

## **Bad Leaders and Bad Followers**

Search the internet for the term *toxic leader*, and you find a host of definitions and articles. They typically involve an abusive personal attribute, a misplaced sense of entitlement, or a lack of competence undermining the ability to build a positive command climate. There is no doubt that many Army leaders meet the above definition, and as a result, their organizations suffer.

*Toxic subordinate* is not part of the Army lexicon but ought to have an equal place when discussing leadership and organizational value because, as stated previously, every leader is a follower. My definition of a toxic subordinate is someone who exhibits mannerisms detrimental to a positive command climate, readiness, esprit de corps, and Army values, and who influences others to follow their errant lead. Simply put, they lack a forthright attitude, which is a cancer that can infect the entire crew. The result is similar to toxic leadership: a poor climate and reduced unit readiness.

## **When do you become a toxic subordinate?**

### **1. Engagement in illegal, immoral, or unethical behavior.**

Unfortunately, there are people in the Army involved in activities which fall into the above category. They are devastating to our readiness, to preserving the trust of the American public, and in creating a good command climate. If Soldiers do something illegal, immoral, or unethical, they will be caught and held accountable. If you know someone who is doing wrong and you do nothing, you are as toxic as the person committing the act.

Do not underestimate how hard this is. I can look at several examples throughout my career where I know I failed the Army because I lacked the courage to police our ranks. I love the Army, and I knew what the right thing was. I just did not do it. Learn from my mistakes and take care of business.

### **2. Failure to join the team you are on.**

We have all met the "back at Bragg" guy who tells you how horrible the unit is and how their old unit was so much better, while they do very little to implement meaningful change. You will serve in many Army units, some will be better than others. If you are squared away, start making a difference and make your current unit the best it can be. Join the team you are on and make it a great team.

Meanwhile, complaints will not go unnoticed by subordinates, who will wonder if something is wrong. This has a toxic effect on the command climate and will never result in a state of pride in the unit, which is the hallmark of great organizations.

### **3. Social media is the preferred forum to let the world know how bad the chain of command or unit is.**

Many of us have seen the person who likes to film their rant of the day or post about how horrible their leaders are and post it on Facebook. My advice? Business is business, keep it that way. There have been many decisions I did not like or thought would lead to failure. I did what I could to influence the decisions and went out and did my job.

There are, however, open-door policies and other channels which can be used to address Soldier concerns. There is no need to suffer in silence but do not use social media to post the unit's business for all the world to see, along with your "expert commentary." While you are at it, if you post items inconsistent with Army policies or values, you are well on your way to being a toxic subordinate.

### **4. Allowing disagreement to lead to disloyalty.**

We hear it in every after action review: "Disagreement is not disloyalty." There will be times where you disagree with a decision or course of action your boss makes. Just remember there will also be times when your subordinates will disagree with your decisions. How you execute the decisions with which you disagree will teach your subordinates how to execute the decisions with which they do not agree.

You are doing it right if your subordinates can never tell whether you "like" a decision because you are completely professional. This is harder than it sounds because often these decisions are very personal. Don't take things personally. Remember your obligation as both a subordinate and leader and execute with the same vigor you would if the idea had been your own. When you allow others to sense your disappointment or lack of confidence in a decision, or fail to support a plan fully, you are a toxic subordinate.

### **Tips on how to be a great subordinate:**

- 1. Do not make your problem your bosses' problem ... BUT ... do not be afraid to ask for help ... AND ... do not manage a mission or project to failure.**

This sentence is full of contradictions and illustrates the difficulty of the art of being a good follower. As a good follower, you should never go to your boss with a problem without attempting to manage it at your level or through other channels. Often, someone in the organization can help you find a solution. When you brief your boss and she says, "Did you talk to Capt. Smith," and you say, "No ma'am," you may have just identified yourself as someone who lacks initiative or problem-solving skills.

In most cases, it may be a tough problem (if it were easy, you would know what to do), so do

not be afraid to ask for help if you took all prudent measures at your level to resolve the issue. Think through your boss's likely response and action and make sure you run it down, so you stay a step ahead.

Regardless of how great a leader you are, there may be some problems which are simply unsolvable at your level. For those circumstances, get help.

And lastly, do not be "that guy" who drops a bomb at a meeting and announces the project is behind or on a path to failure because you needed something early on and it did not get the right leader emphasis. In short, handle your business, do everything you can to exhaust all means to solve your problem, and if you feel the project is going to fail, raise the concern immediately, if necessary, through command channels.

## **2. If your bosses ask for a pizza, bring'em a pizza.**

Not every commander or boss is great at giving guidance or being direct. But when they do give specifics, do what they tell you. I cannot tell you how many times I heard a commander give guidance, and the person came back with something else. If you have other priorities or ideas you think are value-added, great – that is what we pay you for, to take the initiative and be creative, but first, bring your boss the pizza he or she ordered then bring him or her the other ideas you cooked up.

## **3. Do the job you were asked to do, not the job you want to do.**

In most Army units, you serve in different capacities to benefit the organization, to include staff and direct leadership roles. Understand you are in the position where the unit needs you to be, and which will likely develop you in ways you may not fully appreciate. Either way, it does not matter what you want.

I saw a young infantry lieutenant go to a forward support company and serve as a platoon leader. It was probably not the job he wanted, but he hit a home run and increased everyone's estimation of his character and leadership. On the other hand, we have all met the "disgruntled staff guys" who dazzle you with tales of how great they were on the line but provide no value because they are so upset they landed on staff. Do the best you can at whatever is asked of you and humble yourself if you are not in your dream job.

## **4. Understand how leaders make decisions, and try to think that way.**

A common complaint of leaders regarding subordinates is "they don't see the big picture." On the flip side, most subordinates complain their higher echelon "forgot where they came from and are out of touch." Truthfully, I think both apply at times, and this is where transparency and shared understanding become important.

When I make decisions I usually ask myself what is best for the Army, unit, and soldier while considering the optics of the decision through the lens of command climate

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A wise leader once told me, when making decisions he would cut off a hand to save an arm. This really resonated with me and reinforced the thought that, although my unit was important (especially to me!), I was just one blip on the radar screen and there were other issues more pressing than mine, or that I might have to take a loss to benefit the organization. Sadly, many of these decisions come down to picking the best of several sub-optimal choices, so think big picture and long-term, and do not take it personally.

#### **5. Solve your bosses' problems.**

I once had a leader tell me, "As a first sergeant, I expect you to be great at the day-to-day business of running your company. That, to me, equals success. But if you really want to be excellent, extend your influence and make the bigger unit better. Create a system or standard operating procedure the whole battalion can use, help a buddy to the left and right, or develop a junior leader I can pull out of your company and put into a critical position. Remember, you have one foot in your company, but you also need to have one foot in the battalion. That's how you become excellent."

That really drove it home for me and broadened my understanding of how I could extend my influence to help my larger unit. It also began to shape how I thought about different equities throughout the battalion and how I could help my higher headquarters solve problems. It encouraged me to place extra value on subordinates who could help me solve my problems. Too often we relegate ourselves to the role of problem identifiers rather than problem solvers. If you want to be a hero, solve your higher HQ's problem.

#### **6. Execute and report.**

We trust you! When you are promoted, the first line ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/r600-8-19\\_Web\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/r600-8-19_Web_FINAL.pdf)) spoken during the promotion ceremony usually starts "The Secretary of the Army has reposed special trust and confidence ..."<sup>2</sup> Go out and lead with confidence. If you understand the commander's intent, you are armed with everything you need to make good decisions.

This really applies in dynamic environments where you may not have time to communicate the complete situation. Your boss needs you to make the right decision and execute the order, followed up by a timely report. Do not get paralyzed with indecision or concern about what the boss will think – you already know. Go out and win, and do not forget to report!

#### **7. Don't put your boss in a box when it comes to decisions.**

Part of being a good subordinate is understanding your boss' decision-making preferences and knowing how he or she likes the information presented. Try to think ahead to decisions your boss will have to make and analyze the likely options available at that point. Give your boss as much time, space, and information as possible to make the decision.

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Do not be "that guy" who shows up around 1700 on Friday expecting a signature or decision on something of which your boss is completely unaware. Most of us will say, "Sorry boss, this is short notice," when it usually comes down to the fact that someone failed to anticipate or get ahead of something and now we want the boss to make the decision, possibly without some key information. Nothing makes a decision-maker angrier than being forced into making a decision. Do everything you can to prevent this from happening to your boss. Think ahead, get ahead, and stay ahead.

### **Let's develop great leaders and followers**

I think we should give just as much thought to how to be great followers as we do to being great leaders because I think they are linked. Being a better follower will make you a better leader. I have been lucky to work with great leaders who taught me to give as much thought to followership as to leadership. This wisdom has served me well throughout my Army career.

Let's do the same for our current force and help them understand their requirements as subordinates as well as their requirements as leaders.

### **Notes**

1. *ADP 6-22: Army Leadership*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 2012. [https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/adp6\\_22.html](https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/adp6_22.html)  
([https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/adp6\\_22.html](https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/adp6_22.html))
2. *Army Regulation-600-8-19, Enlisted Promotions and Reductions*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), Sept. 14, 2016. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/r600-8-19\\_Web\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/r600-8-19_Web_FINAL.pdf)  
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