


Handling Toxic Leadership

By William LaFalce

NCO Journal

Oct. 25, 2017

Download the PDF  (/Portals/7/nco-journal/docs/Handling-Toxic-Leadership.pdf)



Toxic leadership (Graphic by NCO Journal)

Leadership is the process of influencing and guiding others to accomplish a mission.¹ In the Army, the commander and his or her leadership style reflect the unit's success or failure. The Army is an organization of values and its leaders accept the responsibility to develop and lead others to achieve results. When a leader's personal values and outcomes override the needs of the Army and its Soldiers, then the climate becomes toxic. It is this culture of toxic leadership which destroys unit morale and results in highly qualified Soldiers leaving the Army.²

What is a toxic leader?

According to retired Lt. Col. Darrell Aubrey, author of "The Effect of Toxic Leadership," toxic leaders are individuals who, by the very nature of their self-interest, abuse power and position and promote themselves at the expense of subordinates.³

As cited in the Military Review article, "Narcissism and Toxic Leaders" by retired Lt. Col. Joseph P. Doty, Ph.D., and Master Sgt. Jeffrey E. Fenlason, toxic leaders may be narcissistic, poor listeners, lack empathy, often take credit from others' work, be hypersensitive to criticism, have an over-inflated sense of self-importance and often fly into rages, berating and humiliating subordinates.⁴

To superiors, toxic leaders appear competent, brash, and goal-oriented, but they achieve short-lived goals. These leaders are a complex mix of self-centered motivations and behaviors, which feed their self-worth. They come from all occupations and socio-economic backgrounds.⁵

A leader's mild to moderate narcissistic traits can be healthy for an organization, but when these traits become extreme, they lead to a toxic environment.

According to Doty and Fenlason, a 2013 Army report showed that 80 percent of officers and NCOs had encountered toxic leaders, with 20 percent claiming to have worked for one.⁶

Two leaders that exemplify the contrast between a good leader and toxic leader can be found in the book *Band Of Brothers, E Company 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to the Eagles' Nest*, written by Stephen Ambrose. In the book, then 1st Lt. Herbert Sobel was assigned as company commander and responsible for training the Soldiers of Easy company. Sobel trained the Soldiers by pushing them to the breaking point.

As a commander, Sobel was often at odds with his executive officer, 1st Lt. Richard Winters, because he did not train alongside his Soldiers (nor did his officers). Instead, he imposed standards he could not keep. Sobel, as seen by many of his officers, NCOs and Soldiers, was incompetent, uncaring, and unqualified to lead. His philosophy was, "winning first, and Soldiers last."⁷

In contrast, Winters demonstrated a positive leadership style because he led by example, placed the welfare of his Soldiers first, and showed compassion. Winters shared the same training, discomforts, and living conditions of his men.⁸

"No doubt about it, [Sobel] brought us together." Winters said. "We had to survive Sobel."⁹

A toxic leader's micromanagement into the daily operations at the squad, section, and team level impedes the NCO or platoon leader's ability to lead even to the point of directing what individual tasks soldiers do within a platoon.¹⁰

What to do

Noncommissioned officers need to recognize and develop a subtle solution to protect their Soldiers from toxic leadership. They must recognize who it is and maintain professionalism and bearing when dealing with the individual.

In his article, "Toxic Boss? How Successful People Overcome Them," Travis Bradberry, Ph.D., identifies several strategies to deal with different types of toxic bosses. One strategy is to work with the 'micromanager' in order to grasp his or her "envisioned way" of doing business then seek feedback. Bradberry recommends, neutralizing them by presenting your ideas in a way that allows them to take partial credit and by picking your battles wisely.¹¹

If the toxic leader is a peer, the NCO can have a positive influence on him or her in ways to help the individual recognize and curb their behavior.

There are five ways of dealing with a narcissistic leader, said Steven Berglas, Ph. D., author of, *5 Ways to Shut Down a Narcissist*. "Keep your expectations low, never delude yourself into believing they enjoy your company, never criticize or confront the toxic leader, or be prepared to face their wrath, never ignore them, and have sympathy for them,"¹² Berglas said.

Toxic leadership does not flourish in climates where a system of checks and balances provides subordinates the opportunity to give feedback to senior leaders.

"By regulating moderating behaviors and improving methods of organizational governance, Army leaders may reduce out-of-value behavior," Aubrey said.¹³

In an article titled "Leadership" published in *From One Leader to Another, Volume II*, 1st Sgt. Michael Cavezza recounts his experiences in Afghanistan with a unit demoralized by toxic leadership. He considered it a dire situation and had to find a way to "reconstruct" the unit.

First, systems needed to be put in place that would create accountability and integrate checks and balances into daily activities" Cavezza said. "I was determined to pull this unit out of its downward spiral and transform it into a fully operational unit."¹⁴

In order to succeed in a toxic environment it is important for NCOs to engage leadership, focus on team building, enforce standards, and understand traits that can help mitigate the adverse outcomes of toxic leaders.

Join the discussion at <https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>.

Notes

1. United States, U.S. Army, Government Printing Office, *Army Leadership*, September 10, 2012, accessed September 20, 2017, <https://armypubs.us.army.mil/doctrine/index/html>.
2. Darrell Aubrey, "The Effects of Toxic Leadership," Air War College, 2012, , accessed September 8, 2017, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/aubrey_toxic_leadership.pdf.
3. Aubrey, p. 2
4. Joe Doty and Jeff Fenlason, "Narcissism and Toxic Leaders," *Military Review*, Jan. & Feb. 2013. p. 56
5. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Surviving Toxic Leaders: How to Work for Flawed People in Churches, Schools, and Christian Organizations* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 3.
6. Doty and Fenlason, 55
7. Roger McDonald, "Cruel Leaders Versus Leaders Who Lead By Example | LinkedIn," rogermcdonald.com.au, June 8, 2015, accessed September 14, 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/cruel-leaders-versus-who-lead-example-roger-james-mcdonald>.
8. McDonald, "Cruel Leaders"
9. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagles Nest* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017).p. 26
10. Brock Young, "8 Symptoms Of A Toxic Command Climate," *Task & Purpose*, February 19, 2016, accessed September 08, 2017, <http://taskandpurpose.com/8-symptoms-of-a-toxic-command-climate/>
11. Travis Bradberry, "Toxic Boss? How Successful People Overcome Them" *Forbes*, June 17, 2015, accessed September 21, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2015/06/17/how-successful-people-overcome-toxic-bosses/2/#715b1f5465a2>
12. Steven Berglas, "5 Ways To Shut Down A Narcissist" *Forbes*, September 20, 2015, accessed September 08, 2017

12. Steven Berglas, 5 Ways to Shut Down A Narcissist, Forbes, September 20, 2010, accessed September 08, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenberglas/2012/05/21/5-ways-to-thwart-a-narcissists-most-pernicious-propensity-setting-you-up-then-shooting-you-down/#5d35fb2c485e>
13. Aubrey, p. 22
14. Joe B. Parson and Carl W. Fischer, From One Leader to Another Volume II (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2015). pp. 229-230