



It is essential to recognize that addressing toxic leadership is not just a matter of individual discipline or isolated interventions; it requires a comprehensive and systemic approach at all levels in the U.S. Army. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

# Breaking the Cycle

## Eradicating Toxic Leadership

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**T**oxic leadership is a problem in many organizations worldwide. It persists in the U.S. Army because of apathetic leadership tolerance and Soldiers' inability to identify and mitigate it properly and appropriately. Toxic leaders display combinations of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that adversely affect subordinates, organizations, and mission performance (Department of the Army, 2019).

The Army must change how it teaches Soldiers to

identify and deal with toxic leadership because current methods tolerate and, at times, promote narcissism, undermine organizational commitments, and entrench toxic leadership into organizational culture.

Addressing toxic leadership requires cultural shifts within the Army to promote more open, respectful, and supportive environments, which can be lengthy and complex. Acknowledging these challenges is the first step toward developing more effective strategies to identify

and eliminate toxic leadership within the Army.

## Addressing the Problem

Toxic leadership violates legitimate organizational interests while decreasing its members' commitment and motivation (Aubrey, 2012). However, identifying toxic leaders is not always easy, as their detrimental behaviors are often hidden by superficial charisma or short-term achievements.

Also, the Army's hierarchical and rigid structure can sometimes inhibit open communication necessary for reporting toxic behaviors, especially when it involves higher-ranking Soldiers. A 2009 study showed 24% of Soldiers planned to leave the Army because of toxic leadership and perceived mistreatment (Reed & Olsen, 2010).

Additionally, the Center for Army Leadership's Annual Survey of Army Leaders from 2009-2010 found that more than 80% of Army leaders directly observed a toxic leader the previous year, and 20% worked for one (Elle, 2012).

There is also the challenge of distinguishing between authoritative leadership, often necessary in military settings, and leadership that crosses or morphs into toxicity. Therefore, it is important to be able to recognize the cornerstone of behavior that ultimately morphs into toxicity: narcissism.

## Narcissistic Behavior

Leaders who display narcissistic behaviors contribute to toxic organizational leadership and are highly preoccupied with their self-importance (Doty & Fenlason, 2013). These qualities often lead to or amplify toxic leadership. These leaders mistakenly attribute positive outcomes to themselves and blame all other outcomes on those around them.

Narcissism aligns with toxic leadership characterizations of self-serving pettiness. These narcissistic Army leaders are often reassigned or promoted before the full effect of their narcissism is realized. Narcissistic leadership displays itself through two lenses, productive and unproductive, and there is a stark contrast between them (Ulmer, 2012).

Productive narcissists look for complex big-picture challenges that lead to significant successes that leave historical legacies (Maccoby, 2004). Two popular military characterizations of productive narcissism are Army generals Patton and MacArthur due to their ability to thrive amidst chaos while balancing risk and achieving high marks of success (Reed, 2015). Although productive narcissism

can quickly sour, it is not always a catalyst for toxic leadership.

Unproductive narcissists have emotional imbalances that can easily transform into toxic leadership. These narcissists look for openings to tear others down, especially if they show potential (Reed, 2015). Toxic leadership from unproductive narcissists is problematic for any organization, but even more so in the Army because of the extreme nature of its worldwide mission, scope, and goals. Narcissistic behaviors are often supported in organizational cultures, destroying organizational commitment by allowing toxicity to thrive.

## Organizational Commitment

Toxic leadership undermines organizational commitment, which is one's psychological and emotional attachment to an organization (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). As it increases and displays itself in an organization, narcissistic leader subordinates develop resentment toward the leader and the unit (Chiok Foong Loke, 2001).

As career dissatisfaction festers, workplace deviance becomes the standard outlet for frustration (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Workplace deviances are counterproductive behaviors, usually exhibited in some kind of retaliation to perceived injustice with the intent to harm their organization (Greenberg, 2003).

A study by Weaver and Yancey (2010) shows direct correlations between toxic leadership and a decline in organizational commitment. Organizational commitment decreases because culture perception allows a toxic environment (Aubrey, 2012). Therefore, the Army needs a new accountability organizational culture



A Basic Leader Course instructor from the 7th Army Training Command's NCO Academy, watches as a Soldier from the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team inspects his squad during drill and ceremony practice. All professional military education programs must teach a toxic leadership identification and mitigation practicum in addition to their usual training. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Jones)





The Army must teach Soldiers to identify and deal with toxic leadership because current methods tolerate narcissism, undermine organizational commitments, and further mesh toxic leadership into organizational cultures. (Photo by Terrance Bell)

designed to undermine toxic environments and increase organizational commitments throughout the enterprise.

Even in other military branches, such as the Navy, toxic leadership has left a negative impact. According to Lt. Cmdr. Courtney Callaghan, a public affairs officer assigned to the Chief of Navy Information in Washington, D.C. (2022):

Toxic leadership is just as dangerous to the mental health of service members as experiences under fire in combat. One of these two triggers is entirely preventable. The Navy should make every effort to remediate and eliminate toxic leaders from its ranks. (para. 4)

## Toxic Leadership in Organizational Culture

Toxic leaders harm the Army's reputation and reduce overall effectiveness. They threaten military readiness, leadership development, and effectiveness (Hinds & Steele, 2012). Therefore, while organizational culture can be one of the most complex problems to solve, it is the most important on which to focus large-scale solutions.

According to retired Chaplain (Col.) Kenneth R. Williams, Ph.D., a former senior military fellow in the Department of Ethics, National Defense University at Fort Lesley McNair, Washington, D.C., in his 2019 article in the *Military Review*, the cost of tolerating such behaviors in the Department of Defense is detrimental. Williams highlights the multifaceted impacts of toxic leadership, not just on morale and unit cohesion, but also on the financial and operational aspects of military

effectiveness. He argues that the failure to address toxic leadership can lead to significant resource wastage, diminished health outcomes for personnel, and weakened military readiness.

## Solution

A practical solution that involves Soldiers at every rank incorporates a toxic leadership identification and mitigation module at every level of professional military education. The module would teach Soldiers regulatory and theory-based toxic leadership definitions, leading indicators, and mitigation methods within the Army educational structure. Soldiers will analyze multiple Army case studies highlighting various scenarios demonstrating toxic and narcissistic leadership behaviors. Although the Army has recently rebranded toxic leadership as counterproductive or destructive leadership, this module would further demonstrate the differences of characteristics associated with each area and establish connections to the phrase still used in other industries and sectors.

Additionally, Soldiers will use reflective journaling to solidify course understanding based on their personal experiences in the Army. Finally, to measure course material retention and complete the class, Soldiers must earn a score of 100% on a final exam consisting of multiple-choice, matching, and essay answers. This practical solution may prove worthwhile because it would improve toxic leadership awareness, strengthen the force's resolve, and boost service commitments. It doesn't just fix current leadership issues but also safeguards the future of the Army by investing in a leadership culture that is resilient, respectful, and reflective of the highest ideals of military service.

## Conclusion

The persistent issue of toxic leadership in the Army not only undermines Soldier morale and effectiveness it also threatens the foundational values upon which the Army is built. It is essential to recognize that addressing toxic leadership is not just a matter of individual discipline or isolated interventions; it requires a comprehensive and systemic approach at all levels in the U.S. Army.

Implementing robust training modules in professional military education is a significant step toward enhancing awareness and developing effective strategies to combat toxic leadership. This initiative, however, must be complemented by a cultural shift within the Army,

promoting a leadership ethos grounded in respect, integrity, and empathy. The fight against toxic leadership is not just a matter of policy; it is a commitment to

the well-being and future of the Army and those who dedicate their lives to its service. ■

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