



The three A's — arrogance, abysmal performance, and abandonment — define counterproductive leaders, who undermine organizational effectiveness and show little regard for their subordinates' well-being and development. (AI-generated image by *NCO Journal*)

The Three A's of Counterproductive Leaders

By Sgt. Maj. Carl J. Johnson

38th Air Defense Artillery Brigade (ADA)

Quality leaders who live the Army values and display moral and ethical excellence demonstrate character, competence, and commitment in everything they do (Department of the Army, 2019).

Counterproductive leaders serve contrary to the Army values and are arrogant in receiving and sharing knowledge. They perform their duties abysmally and abandon subordinates when blame for failure needs a home. These leaders protect their position and abuse their authority as they staunch their unit,

peers, and subordinates' development.

All leaders, regardless of ability, send Soldiers to schools, including Equal Opportunity (EO), Master Resilience Training (MRT), Master Fitness Trainer (MFT), and Sexual Harassment Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP). This practice maintains full-time and collateral duty trainer numbers for required positions according to Department of the Army standards (Department of the Army, 2020).

These Soldiers fill required additional duty

positions and, when they return, bring the knowledge and tools necessary to improve or sustain units and their programs. However, when these newly trained subject matter experts (SMEs) return, they might hear, “That’s not how we do it here” — from the same senior leader who sent them or approved their need to attend the school.

These trained Soldiers improve their unit and themselves by applying newly acquired knowledge. They are invaluable assets to the organization. Toxicity, or being counterproductive, undermines good order and discipline and can leave an organization worse than when the toxic leader arrived (Department of the Army, 2024).

Counterproductive leaders, marked by arrogance, abysmal performance, and abandonment, pose a significant threat to organizational effectiveness and unit readiness, and can be identified by their self-serving behaviors and lack of regard for their subordinates’ well-being and development.

They attempt to ensure their future by refusing to listen to those they send to school and instead develop subject-matter amateurs (SMAs) they can more easily subjugate.

Arrogance

Continuing the previous example, arrogant leaders send subordinates to school and then trivialize or disregard their knowledge. These same leaders think they are smarter or know better than others, especially those junior to them. They often discount input, giving it little to no value (Rigglo, 2019).

These arrogant, counterproductive leaders only acknowledge that the individual helped the unit meet its training number requirement. Echoed in this concept is the circumstances of Spc. Vanessa Guillen and the incident at Fort Cavazos, Texas, (formerly Fort Hood) that led to her death.

The Fort Hood Independent Review Committee (FHIRC) determined that a lack of unit cohesion stemmed from leadership (Robinson, 2020). Among the problems of workplace hostility, gender discrimination, and underage drinking, low levels of peer respect and unit cohesion gave credence to the installation and the unit being classified as high risk (Fort Hood Independent Review Committee (FHIRC), 2020, p. 24).

The committee’s first finding determined the



Common among counterproductive leaders is a lack of regard for the negative consequences affecting their workers. The more prolific the leader, the more prone the organization is to be toxic. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Tawny Kruse)

SHARP program was ineffective below the brigade level (FHIRC, 2020, pp. 17-19) because of the arrogant leaders who thought they knew what was best for the unit and its readiness.

This leadership resulted in units with surface-level compliance at echelons below brigade. They failed to use the school-trained, experienced, and proficient SMEs. In their place were amateurs and leaders without the drive to implement the program elements necessary to execute the processes and procedures meant to protect Guillen.

Furthermore, the FHIRC determined the Fort Hood Criminal Investigative Division (CID) detachment was understaffed and lacked the expertise needed to support apprentice workers in the organization (FHIRC, 2020, p. 66). The committee also determined no direct growth, experience, or expertise was available for SHARP professionals beyond the brigade level as required by the Department of the Army (FHIRC, 2020, p. 51).

Subject matter amateurs are like personnel who fill positions based on experience and do not meet the basic school training requirements. They may have no desire to help an organization grow and improve its readiness and resilience. Instead, they find themselves subordinate to a leader or leaders who support a stagnant unit incapable or unwilling to nurture protective behaviors.

While competent leaders generate achievements, incompetent and counterproductive leaders produce low-performing results. They deter unit readiness.

The epitome of readiness is overall Soldier well-being. When Soldiers attempt or commit suicide, there is a loss across all spectrums of professional and personal well-being and readiness.

In 2010, there were almost 30 suicides in Iraq (Zwerdling, 2014). Assigned by then-Brig. Gen. Pete Bayer, anthropologist Dave Matsuda crossed Iraq multiple times and interviewed more than 50 Soldiers. He found that beyond creating professional problems, leaders were making their victims' lives a living hell.

Retired Col. George Reed and a colleague interviewed students at the Army War College, and most said toxic leaders were "abusive and self-aggrandizing, arrogant and petty" (Zwerdling, 2014).

Psychologist and academic Theo Veldsman

categorized typical counterproductive leaders who surround themselves with amateurs and have no regard for their own positive portrayal of personal attitudes or technical and professional ability. He identifies them as:

- Cold fish
- Snakes
- Glory seekers
- Puppet masters
- Monarchs (Veldsman, 2016)

Cold fish are leaders who believe any decision is justifiable based on the desired outcome. Hand in hand with this concept are the snakes, who believe the world is meant to serve them in their personal and professional needs.

A glory seeker is the equivalent of a spotlight ranger, someone who only performs well or puts in full effort when directly observed by a superior. A puppet master is just that: They use others to achieve their end state.

The monarch, at least in the Army, can be the worst. They rule over their kingdoms without regard for others and seek more glory and recognition.

Common among all these leaders is a lack of regard for the negative consequences affecting their workers. The more prolific the leader, the more prone the organization is to be toxic.

Arrogance seeks relationships with amateurs. This behavior allows for a self-sustaining toxic environment, much like a terrarium. While everything within its sphere may thrive, this is without influence from the rest of the world. Thus, they are

coachable, influenceable, or willing to be team players.

Behavioral statistician Joseph Folkman supports this idea, noting seven areas that can reveal signs of arrogance:

- Relationships
 - Honesty and integrity
 - Being a team player
 - Less coachable
 - Fails to keep others informed
 - Less inclusive
 - Insufficient focus on developing others
- (Folkman, 2023)

Relationships play a large role, regardless of leader type. Arrogant ones can't value others' work, which sabotages relationships. Honesty and integrity are either present or wholly absent.

The rest of the areas are marked by a similar lack —



Counterproductive leaders serve contrary to the Army values and are arrogant in receiving and sharing knowledge. They perform their duties abysmally and abandon subordinates when blame for failure needs a home. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Agustín Montañez)



Arrogant leaders send subordinates to school and then trivialize or disregard their knowledge. These same leaders think they are smarter or know better than others, especially those junior to them. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret)

to be a team player, to be coachable, and so on. These deficits, however, make for counterproductive leaders who believe they are the only ones capable of scoring a winning goal. If leaders don't win, it's their teams' fault that didn't allow them to play.

Humility and arrogance are both a part of leadership. However, leaders must choose the path they wish to follow. Arrogance is necessary for leaders to be competitive against peers and keep their units running (Taylor, 2018).

Arrogant leaders accept or disregard the advice and knowledge of those they send to school. If they choose to ignore others, the organization's performance dwindles, and the leader's performance worsens.

Abysmal

Poor leadership style and counterproductive behaviors result in "abysmal organizational performance" (Puni et al., 2016). Based on organizational climate and work performance, the signs of an abysmal leader can start small and go unnoticed by individuals on the outside looking in.

People outside the organization may not notice because these toxic leaders can reflect effectiveness and competency while impeding the progress of others and/or the organization. Overall, this starts or contributes to an unhealthy environment (Wolor et al., 2022).

With change comes friction, and with friction comes

sticking points. Often avoided, friction is not always bad and requires vetting for effectiveness or to evaluate ineptitude. Abysmal leaders fear friction and difficulty because of the attention it brings to their already plighted state of authority and mismanagement.

Leaders often resist change not because it is new but because they do not care to know how much work it will take to institute and implement changes and new directions. These abysmally performing leaders realize their SMEs, whom they just sent to school, know the effort and work change will take.

Counterproductive leaders hold onto the past or what worked for them because it is what they know. They close their minds or ignore new strategies and assume they know better than those attempting to effect change. They target non-school-trained amateurs and place them in positions that protect the existing framework. The approach allows for comfortably accomplishing missions at the expense of improvement and higher success.

Within any leadership structure are pillars that uphold what a person sees as important in guiding others. While leadership styles can evolve and mature, their basic precepts and foundations rarely change.

Abysmal leaders are the opposite and often fail with even the most basic concepts, such as trust, when that pillar does not suit their goals. Failing leaders surround

themselves with others who may not have duplicitous aims but may not be good at their jobs (or are unwilling to improve their surroundings).

SMAs may have solutions in sight without knowing the resources required and what it will take to make effective and positive change (Michael, 2021). A unit's true resources, the Soldiers, can greatly influence its performance rather than training outcome or results. In any organization, the connection between leaders and subordinates magnifies and enhances areas of sustainment and improvement.

Abysmally counterproductive leaders will seize every opportunity to remain in positions of power while striving for promotion to the next level of authority. They use subordinates who lack the knowledge and ability to fight against intimidating, threatening, and coercive behaviors and attitudes.

An example of this concept is the Wells Fargo fake account creation scandal. Named in this stunt was CEO John Stumpf and more than 5,000 lower-level bank employees (Zetlin, 2019). The scandal involved the creation of millions of fraudulent accounts for customers without their knowledge or consent to meet unrealistic sales goals.

Between leaders and subordinates (followers), it is the followers who, by their choices, control a situation and potentially an organization's success or failure (Martinez, 2021).

As performance declines and outcomes are not achieved, counterproductive leaders abandon their subordinates and blame SMEs and subordinate leaders. Unfortunately, senior leaders can attribute their poor performance to those who work for them and their inability to execute according to received training.

Some overlook these counterproductive senior leaders, who deliberately sabotage their subordinates by failing to train them properly or inconspicuously ignore their advice. This behavior is common even though the workers are school-trained and recognized as SMEs.

This blame game can be the premise for leaders abandoning their support element. Worse yet, the situation can lead lower-echelon Soldiers to leave the organization.

Abandonment

Counterproductive leaders will abandon their subordinates, as blame for inefficiency or failure needs a home. Subordinates in this type of scenario tend to leave their organizations due to lack of senior leader support and the inability (or unwillingness) of those in charge to hold others accountable for their actions.

Leaders may ignore incompetence and instead distribute the workload to others to compensate for inefficiency and to reward earlier excellent work performance (Graham, 2020).



While competent leaders generate achievements, counterproductive leaders produce low-performing results and deter unit readiness. (U.S. Army photo by Ken Scar)

These leaders believe their behavior permits them to highlight their organization's previous performance as their ability to drive and motivate others. Simultaneously, these same counterproductive leaders will shift blame for current failure to others within the same organization, characterizing poor performance as the subordinates' inability to follow the same guidance that allowed the leader to achieve earlier unit success.

In this leadership model, SMEs who contributed greatly to previous success find themselves the highlight of leadership failure. They are replaced with amateurs who are submissive and willing to accept blame or fault for failures in which they had no part.

In any organization, counterproductive leaders are quick to abandon their SMEs — and those same SMEs may also be quick to leave the organization. Their toxic leadership has a negative impact on personnel retention, regardless of whether they are experts or amateurs.

People who feel undervalued and underappreciated are less willing to meet the minimum requirements of their job, let alone make an additional effort to achieve, succeed, or get through a difficult situation.

Counterproductive leaders may refuse to listen to their

SMEs and blame them when the mission fails (VanDyke, 2023). A pervasive and persistent toxic organizational culture generally occurs because leadership fails to recognize the need to address or change. This same leadership is the cause of the retention and recruitment problems and is the reason for a needed change.

Job insecurity and lack of recognition can drive SMEs to abandon ship and SMAs to take their place. While all people can and will seek recognition, amateurs will drive for the spotlight less if it means they can continue pursuing their specific field of professional growth.

When experts thrive in an organization and receive recognition for their efforts, leaving is unnecessary. However, as leaders abandon those who make them successful, those responsible for positive results will abandon those leaders and the organizations that do nothing about them.

Counterproductive leaders will abandon anyone, especially their school-trained experts, when plans fail. If an SMA leads to failure or lack of success, the counterproductive leader can chalk up this shortcoming to needing more training instead of their leadership failure. This behavior occurs when subordinates perform



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less than optimally or shift to a potentially negative spotlight for any reason.

Compounding this problem is the potential subordinate loss. Allowing counterproductive leaders to thrive and continue serving in supervisory positions creates opportunities for workers to want to leave an organization and abandon their loyalty.

Conclusion

The presence of counterproductive leaders, marked by arrogance, abysmal performance, and abandonment, can have far-reaching and devastating consequences for Army organizations.

Measuring quality leaders encompasses character, competence, and commitment. Counterproductive leaders are arrogant in their knowledge and ability, abysmal in their presence and performance, and will abandon anyone who attracts negative attention to them. Abuse of power and authority are top characteristics of counterproductive leaders, and they wield these qualities like antagonistic superheroes who only fight to save their own better good.

It is imperative that leaders prioritize their subordinates' development and well-being, fostering a culture of trust, respect, and open communication. By recognizing and addressing the behaviors of counterproductive leaders, organizations can mitigate the risks of decreased morale, productivity, and job satisfaction, and instead cultivate a positive and supportive environment that allows SMEs to thrive and drive organizations to success.

SMEs bolster organizations and improve the Army. However, counterproductive leaders will actively seek out SMAs who lack the knowledge and ability to fight against their toxic attitudes and behaviors.

As technology improves, the world itself grows



Abysmally counterproductive leaders mask their toxic behaviors behind a facade of competence, exploiting their authority to remain in power and climb the ranks. They manipulate subordinates who lack the knowledge or ability to challenge their coercive and threatening tactics. (AI-generated image by NCO Journal)

smaller. People become more aware and familiar with others through intimate circles. Counterproductive leaders protect their future by closing off those circles from the SMEs who are supposed to improve it.

Ultimately, senior leaders are responsible for identifying and addressing counterproductive leadership. They can promote a culture of excellence, character, and commitment that aligns with Army values — ensuring the well-being and success of their Soldiers and the organization. ■

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Sgt. Maj. Carl Johnson is a 14Z, Air Defense Artillery Senior Sergeant, serving as Task Force Talon Sergeant Major, 38th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, in Guam. He is a graduate of all levels of the Army's Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS) through Sergeants Major Course, CDR/1SG Course, Patriot Master Gunner Course, Sexual Assault Response Coordinator/Victim Advocate (SARC/VA) Career Course, Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) Trainer Course, Equal Opportunity, Master Fitness Trainer Course, Army Basic Instructor Course, and Cadre Training Course. He also has a master's degree in theological studies.



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