Toxic Leadership and Uncivil Workplaces: Sabotaging the Mission and Innovation
Chaplain (Colonel) Kenneth R. Williams
Senior Military Fellow
National Defense University
kenneth.r.williams.mil@msc.ndu.edu

“There’s no greater challenge and there is no greater honor than to be in public service.”
-- Condoleezza Rice

The Issue

The purpose of the military is to secure the nation, its citizens, and its institutions. Government exists to protect and serve the public good, enacting and implementing laws and policies that enable the citizens to thrive. Public administration involves the government executing and implementing law and public policy. The citizens of a principality delegate authority to public officials who will act in their best interest and who meet specific conditions: (1) behave and make decisions that reflect value for the dignity, rights, and equality of all citizens; (2) subordinate their personal opinions to the decisions resulting from legitimate legal and professional processes; (3) practice accountability for their actions to authority and the public; (4) execute their office with competence and efficiency; (5) practice justice and fairness, avoiding favoritism; (6) use resources effectively and efficiently, not exploiting their position or others for personal gain; (7) maintain the credibility of their profession and institution.¹ In a word, the public expects its officials to practice integrity.

However, while most public officials practice integrity as outlined in these seven conditions, many officials do not, exploiting the systems and the population for personal gain and career enhancement. As public servants rise to higher levels of leadership, they are less likely to engage in principled dissent against unethical and immoral actions due to an unhealthy and extreme personal identification with the institution.² They tolerate misconduct in themselves and others, reinforcing a culture that accepts unethical behavior as normal, including extreme internal and external competition with individuals and sister institutions, an extreme bias toward results at all costs, an arrogance of higher purpose, a myth and an associated image that justifies misconduct, and an “us versus them” mentality.³ Additionally in an era of downsizing and budget cuts, many leaders resort to abusive behaviors in order to obtain results.⁴ One manifestation of ethical misconduct that violates the conditions of public integrity is toxic leadership. While many ignore toxic leadership, its effects and prevalence are significant in degrading team members, sabotaging performance, and wasting resources. This paper provides a discussion of toxic leadership including its definition, effects, and costs and concludes with recommendations for intervention.

What Is Toxic Leadership?
Toxic leadership, also known as abusive supervision and downward bullying\(^5\), is a pattern of workplace bullying behavior involving shaming and blaming, passive hostility, team sabotage, indifference and lack of compassion, a negative and corrosive interpersonal style, and exploitation or the appearance of using others for personal gain\(^6\), each of which is described with examples in Table 1. Bullying is defined as:

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.\(^7\)

This definition includes four major criteria – frequency, persistency, hostility, and power imbalance. In order to qualify as bullying, hostile and degrading acts, either active or passive, are directed by the bully/toxic leader toward a specific target at least twice weekly for a duration of at least six months. As a form of bullying, the same criteria apply to toxic leadership.

**Table 1**: Criteria, Description, and Examples of Toxic Behavior.\(^8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Observable Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaming</td>
<td>Humiliation, sarcasm, put-downs, jabs, blaming</td>
<td>• Persistently pointing out mistakes intending to reduce another's self-worth</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>• Public embarrassment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive hostility</td>
<td>Passive-aggressive behavior redirecting one's anger inappropriately on a target person or persons</td>
<td>• Resenting requests, deliberate procrastination, and intentional mistakes to serve self and avoid serving others</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Complaints of injustice and lack of appreciation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Compliments that veil criticism</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Always the last word (punch)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Spreading rumors about subordinates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team sabotage</td>
<td>Meddling to establish one's personal power base resulting in decreased cohesion and performance</td>
<td>• Inconsistency – unclear, constantly changing expectations and unpredictable policies, procedures, and behaviors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Dysfunctional communication – in order to maintain power and control, withholding key information, sharing incomplete information, or sharing partial items of information resulting in each team member having incomplete data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>An apparent lack of regard for the welfare of others, especially subordinates</td>
<td>• Lack of compassion and empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Excluding certain people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Disinterest in the successes and unsympathetic to the suffering of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativity</td>
<td>A corrosive interpersonal style that has a negative impact on individual and collective morale and motivation</td>
<td>• Malice – cruelty and degradation is more prevalent than kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Narcissism – uncaring abuse of others for personal gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>The perception of getting ahead at the expense of others</td>
<td>• Inequality – tolerating toxic people, who are often highly skilled, but punishing others</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Favoritism – special treatment for a select few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Nepotism – the hiring of unqualified friends or family</td>
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</table>
Toxic leadership stands in stark contrast with healthy, effective leadership, as defined by Rost: “Leadership is an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.” This definition indicates that leadership is not coercion, manipulation, degradation, humiliation, or exploitation. Instead, it is a multi-directional relationship in which the leaders and followers influence each other in mutually beneficial, meaningful service. While many organizations refer to their leaders as “the leadership”, the term more appropriately refers to the relationship, not the person in charge. Therefore, this paper makes the distinction that toxic leadership does not refer to the abusive leader but to an abusive leader-follower relationship and the accompanying behaviors and practices.

The Impact – Toxic Leadership Is a Problem

Toxic leadership, including overt and covert behaviors, actively and passively hostile distracts team members from the mission, sabotages service, constricts innovation, and wastes resources. Table X provides a list of the research-based associations of toxic leadership and workplace bullying with specific effects and costs.

Effects and Costs.10

Table 2 presents the associated objects, effects and costs of toxic leadership as discovered by research.

Table 2. Effects and Costs Associated with Bullying and Toxic Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Cost/Research Finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Insomnia, anxiety, apathy, lack of</td>
<td>Swedish study reported significant impacts on a diverse group of public service workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>concentration, memory loss, panic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>attacks, mood swings12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PTSD14</td>
<td>76% of targets reported symptoms of PTSD with 29% showing all the criteria.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>75.6% of bullied individuals reported negative health effects; 29% stress; 18% depression.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>100 of 300 of those who committed suicide to have been targets of bullying17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>Psychosomatic symptoms (gastrointestinal</td>
<td>A 1997 report by UNISON, a UK public service union, 75.6% of members stated adverse</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>issues, nausea, loss of appetite,</td>
<td>effects of bullying on health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hypersensitivity to sound, headache</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respiratory, cardiac, and hypertension</td>
<td>Significant impacts on a diverse group of individuals18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intent to leave</td>
<td>Targets of bullying had 26% higher sick absences; £1.5 billion due to sickness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>57.1% of military officers considered leaving their branch of service; £1.5 billion due to sickness</td>
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<tr>
<td>A confirmatory factor analysis discovered strong and significant correlation between abusive supervision and perceived mobility, interactional justice, procedural justice, distributive justice, job satisfaction, continuance commitment, normative commitment, affective commitment, work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Isolation of individuals, Impairment of cohesion, decreased perceptions and expectations of performance, degraded effectiveness, eroding team norms</td>
<td>Public service employees reported increased professional and personal values conflicts, cognitive conflicts, power struggles, targeting, and marginalized contributions and performance; Bullying resulted in perceptions decreased of cohesion and team success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization Organizational performance/productivity, Financial profits, organizational culture, Reputation, Wasted resources, Replacement costs</td>
<td>25% of employees in Great Britain experience decreased productivity due to 4-7% bullying, accounting for a 1.5-2.0% total decline; Estimated cost of bullying to organizations -- $30-$100K per employee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time managing workplace conflicts: among Fortune 1000, 13%</td>
<td>£380 million annually due to bullying; $30K-$100K for each employee who leaves due to bullying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Increased medical costs</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased need for social services</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premature retirement</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Impaired interpersonal relationships outside the workplace</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal costs</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Replacement costs. Significant are the replacement costs of employees who depart due to bullying. According to research, 25 percent of bullied team members and 20 percent of witnesses to bullying depart an organization. First, calculate the cost of replacing the average team member. The standard calculation of replacement cost, including recruiting, interviewing, onboarding, and training, is 1.5 times the departing team members’ annual salary. (Replacement costs for jobs paying $30K-$75K are about 20 percent of the salary while high paying jobs cost up to 213 percent of the salary.) Next, determine the rate of bullying within the organization, which generally is 10 percent but could be as high as 30-50 percent according to studies of US workplaces. Now, multiply the total number of team members in the organization by the rate of bullying (10 percent) and then by 25 percent to obtain the number of departing bullied team members and by the replacement cost to obtain the cost of replacing those who have been bullied. Following the same process, substituting 20 percent of witnesses for 25 percent of bullied team members to obtain the replacement cost of replacing witnesses.
Add the costs of replacing bullied team members and witnesses to obtain the total cost of bullying to the organization.

Effects and Impacts of Toxic Leadership in the US Federal Government

In an unpublished report of a 2017 survey of US military and federal agency students at the National Defense University, 186 respondents reported in an average of 18.3 years of service, they had served under an average of 2.9 toxic leaders. The survey population was a convenience sample of volunteers as contrasted with a random sample, so that a rate of prevalence rate of toxic leadership cannot be determined and generalized to the larger DoD and Federal government populations. However, general patterns and trends can be identified specifically among those who reported serving under toxic leaders. Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents who served under a certain number of toxic leaders.

Table 3. Percentage of Respondents Who Reported the Specified Number of Toxic Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Toxic Leaders Served</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Respondents</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequency of observed toxic leader behaviors. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents that observed various toxic leader behaviors at least weekly. The data indicates that each item is prevalent with the most prevalent being a lack of self-awareness, a negative interpersonal style, suspicion of others, passive hostility, defensiveness, refusal to allow dissent, and shaming and blaming.
Component and Agency. Table 4 shows the number of toxic leaders served by organization – DoD Military, DoD Civilians, non-DoD Civilians (federal agencies). The rate of toxic leaders was determined by dividing the average years of service by the average number of toxic leaders served. Combined, all students reported 2.9 toxic leaders in 20.1 years of service for a rate of one toxic leader every 7.3 years; 116 DoD military reported an average of 2.3 toxic leaders in 19.2 years for a rate of one toxic leader in 8.5 years; 29 DoD civilians reported an average of 3 toxic leaders in 24 years for a rate of almost 8 years; and 41 non-DoD civilians reported an average of almost 3 in 19 years for a rate of 5.6.

Table 4. Comparison of Toxic Leaders by Organization of Assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Average Number of Toxic Leaders Served (ATL)</th>
<th>Average Years of Service (AYS)</th>
<th>Rate of Toxic Leaders Per Years of Service (AYS/ATL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DoD Civilians</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-DoD Civilians</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoD Military</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effect on individual performance and behavior. Two questions in the survey asked respondents to report the frequency and the degree of impact of toxic leadership on them...
personally. For questions dealing with frequency, respondents could select from never, rarely (quarterly), occasionally (monthly), sometimes (twice monthly), frequently (weekly), usually, twice weekly), and always (daily). For the questions dealing with degree of impact, respondents could select from no effect (0%), slight (less than 10%), somewhat (about 30%), moderate (about 50%), significant (about 70%), extreme (about 90%), or completely (100%). Figure 2 shows the percentages of respondents who reported being affected by toxic behaviors in the specified ways at least twice weekly (bi-weekly and daily). At least 39 percent of respondents reported being affected at least twice weekly to the extent of avoiding the toxic leader (58.2%) and worrying about the next encounter (51.6%), an unwillingness to contribute feedback (39.3%), and sharing with co-workers (43.9) and family members (51.1%). Approximately 20% experienced decreased motivation to perform, commitment, and innovation, while ten to 20 percent experienced decreased motivation to learn new skills and to contribute to the team, decreased connection with and trust of others and of safety, and increased mental and physical health. Of note is the small percentage of respondents who reported absenteeism. While absenteeism is a well-documented effect of toxic leadership and hostile workplaces, it may be assumed that military and government team members have a strong personal commitment to their organizations and their mission.
Figure 3 shows the combined percentages of those who stated they were affected at least significantly (including significant, extreme, and completely), defined as a greater than 70 percent impact. Almost identically to Figure 2, at least 45 percent of respondents reported actions of avoidance, worry, sharing with a co-worker or family member, and withdrawal of contributions. Avoidance and worry affect the leader-follower relationship and are a cause of wasted time and cognitive impairment. Sharing with a co-worker or family member results in secondary traumatization of the listeners, so that the toxic effects exceed the direct target and affect others with whom the target contacts. About 20 percent stated they were affected significantly in commitment, innovation, and mental and physical health. Between about 10 percent to 20 percent of respondents reported significant impact on their motivation to perform, learn new skills, and contribute to the team, decreased connection with and trust of the team, and safety.
Average hours of lost productivity. The survey asked respondents to estimate the number of hours of lost time due to various reactions to toxic leadership. Figure 4 shows the average hours of lost productivity with at least three hours each due to talking with other co-workers, worry, and stress, at least 2.5 hours due to avoidance and a total of almost 16 hours per week.
Effects on Bystanders. The survey also asked respondents about the effects of observing others being targeted by the toxic leader. Figure 5 shows the percentages of respondents that were affected at least twice weekly in various ways by observing others being targeted by toxic leader behaviors. Either twice a week or daily, at least 44 percent avoided the toxic leader, 36.2 percent worried about the next encounter, and 24.6 percent were de-motivated to provide constructive feedback.
Figure 6 shows the percentages of respondents who were affected at least to a significant (>70%) degree in specified ways as a result of observing others being targeted. Similar to frequency, the top two effects were avoidance (52.3%) and worry (46.4%). At least 14.1 percent of all respondents were affected by all other ways except absenteeism. The frequency and degree of impact related to bystanders indicate that secondary exposure to toxic leaders has a serious impact on team members.
Effect on team performance and productivity. Figure 7 shows the frequency of the toxic leader’s behavior affecting the performance and productivity of teams at least twice weekly. At least 30 percent of respondents reported that the toxic leader adversely affected the workflow, quantity, quality, and cohesion of teams on a twice weekly basis with over two-thirds reporting that team workflow was affected on a weekly basis.
Figure 8 shows that over 60 percent of respondents reported that the toxic leader affected team processes, quantity, and quality at least to a moderate degree. Almost half reported that team cohesion was moderately affects. The combination of the frequency and degree of toxic leader’s effect on teams is significant, indicating that toxic leadership significantly affects teamwork, not just individuals.
Conclusions and Recommendations

The survey results indicate a sizable, frequent, and deep impact of toxic leadership in the DoD and federal workplace, highlighting several key issues and trends related to leadership in the DoD and the federal workplace that indicate the need for training, policy, practice, and further research. The data are consistent with research in the civilian sector regarding elements of toxic leader behaviors, effects, and costs.

Discussion

Although the convenience sample prevents an accurate assessment of the extent of toxic leadership, toxic behaviors are clearly prevalent in the DoD and federal government, as demonstrated by the high percentage of respondents who observed, were targets of, witnessed others as targets, and were affected by toxic leaders. While all substantially represented organizations had high prevalence of toxic leaders, data indicate that Non-DoD federal agencies were the highest. Data also show that females responded with a slightly higher rate than men of serving under toxic leaders and rates for white and non-white were not statistically different. A high percentage of respondents stated that the most toxic leader they served under demonstrated and affected them and their co-workers at least twice weekly and to a significant
degree. According to respondents, toxic leaders in the DoD and federal government tend to be deficient in self-awareness, self-confidence, the ability to trust, and empathy. They tend to use methods of shame, blame, humiliation, belittling, and passive hostility. When managing toxic behaviors targets and bystanders tend to practice avoidance techniques, worry, decrease their contribution to the success of the team in both innovation and constructive feedback, and turn to co-workers and family members for support.

The survey shows the significant effects of toxic leadership on targets. High percentages of targets engage in avoidance behaviors, worry, and withdrawal of contributions. They also tend to discuss the toxic treatment with co-workers and family members, which spreads the toxicity, creating a secondary toxic effect. Other important effects include the isolation of targets and adverse impact on motivation, commitment, and innovation.

This survey also highlights the impact of toxic leadership on bystanders and the performance of the organization. Toxic leader behaviors not only directly impact the target, but they also indirectly impact bystanders, in a similar pattern to that of targets but to a lesser degree. Upon observing others being targeted by the toxic leader, team members were impacted at least moderately in several ways. These data indicate the widespread impact of toxic leaders on the organization as there is a clear ripple effect of the communicable disease of toxicity.

Toxic leaders distract team members from the mission and the task at hand. The distractions result in a waste of valuable time as targets and bystanders avoid the toxic leader, worry and try to cope with the specific behaviors of humiliation, hostility, and sabotage of performance, as well as the hostile and degrading environment created by the toxic leader. The results indicate that about 16 hours will be wasted each week due to toxic behaviors, with worry, discussions with co-workers, and the drain and distraction of increased stress being the most wasteful. This indicates that on average, those serving under a toxic leader produce three days of work in the average five-day workweek. With the decrease in trust comes a decrease in the speed and an increase in the cost of individual and organizational performance. Toxic leaders may appear to some, especially their superiors, to be high performing and effective, but they ultimately drain subordinates of their mental, physical, and emotional resources.

Toxic leader behaviors do not only affect individuals, targets and bystanders, they also adversely affect organizational performance. Respondents reported high percentages of toxic leader impact on team processes, quality, quantity and cohesion. Although many toxic leaders are highly skilled and able to lead units and organizations to achieve significant results, those results come at a price. They drain the organization dry of valuable resources – human resources. They create a deficit of trust, dignity, and respect.

How Organizations Enable Toxic Leadership
If toxic leadership is so detrimental, how is it that organizations tolerate and enable it? The answer is they have a culture that creates the conditions for toxic leadership to thrive. Kusy and Holloway state, “Toxicity flourishes in situations in which the organization does not provide concrete, behaviorally specific values and has a high tolerance for toxic behaviors.” Additionally, toxic leadership, like bullying, is not isolated to the individual but is a systemic issue, as indicated by

Bullying does not arise solely as a function of personality, but flourishes in specific workgroups that normalize competitive, abusive behaviour (Salin, 2003). If scholars wish to reduce the occurrence of bullying at work, they must address the larger, structural issues that allow it to persist (Hoel and Salin, 2003; Neuman and Baron, 2003; Salin, 2003; Zapf, 1999).37

While few organizations would intentionally create the conditions for toxic leaders to thrive, and most have established core values, including respect, to guide behavior, there is a difference between the stated culture and the actual culture which consists of “the way we do things around here.” Where toxic leaders thrive, the organizational culture includes an extreme bias towards results. The military and government agencies are expected to get results for the security, safety, and provision of the population. The problem is when obtaining results supersedes and replaces respectful treatment of team members. As a result of this results-biased culture, toxic leaders are permitted to abuse, manipulate, and coerce subordinates, most times very subtly and covertly, to get results. The organization tolerates the toxic leader due to the perception of his or her productivity. Metrics are used as a whip to drive team members, not as a measurement of performance. Those toxic leaders are recognized as getting results, but the organization overlooks their behaviors that diminish performance and waste resources. The merit-based personnel evaluation system rewards them with good evaluations. As a result of their good evaluations, they are rewarded with promotion. And the culture of toxic tolerance develops and is reinforced.

Closely associated with a results-biased culture, downsizing and a resource-constraints are associated with increased toxic leadership.38 With increased pressure to “do more with less”, many leaders resort to toxic and abusive behaviors in order to maintain the same level of performance. Values associated with service, loyalty, duty, and honor reinforce doing “whatever it takes to get the job done.”

The last way of tolerating toxic leadership is a lack of accountability, which is due to senior and key leaders, expected to be the custodians of the culture, either being unmotivated, unaware, incapable, or unwilling to hold themselves and others accountable. Many senior leaders simply do not attend to the manner in which results are obtained, assuming that no news is good news. No news could be due to an ineffective system for redress or targets fearing retaliation. Others view the organization as fulfilling its mission and do not have time or energy to attend to a culture of respectful interaction. Often, when being notified of a toxic leader, the custodians of the culture do not know how to respond, either dismissing or doubting the reports. Or, they may take action in restructuring the organization or reassigning the toxic
leader to another department that is a “better fit”, neither of which addresses the behavior, and which spreads toxicity throughout the organization.

Of particular concern are those leaders known as toxic protectors who are unwilling to practice accountability because they benefit from the toxic leader’s behavior. These leaders tolerate abusive behavior in subordinates because they are not directly involved in the abuse but the results or the appearance of results reflect positively on them. No matter how many team members voice complaints, the toxic protector defends and makes excuses for the toxic leader. Similar to the toxic protector is the toxic buffer, the one who shields other team members from the toxic leader’s behavior in attempting to mitigate the abuse. The well-meaning toxic buffer in attempting to diffuse the adverse effects actually perpetuates the abuse and enables the toxic leader. The lack of accountability, the toxic protector, and the toxic buffer reinforce a culture tolerant of toxicity and, as a result, the adverse impacts on team members, teams, and ultimately the organization.

Constraints on resources, declining budgets, decreased team members, technological advances, and a rapidly changing societal, political, and commercial environment require empowerment and innovative solutions. In today’s world, we cannot perpetuate excessive controls and bureaucracy which do not allow for maximized resources. We cannot do business as usual. We must shift the status quo and free people to innovate, explore, and discover enabling more effective methods to emerge.

The Solution – Tend the Garden: Cultivate the Culture

Just as an un-cultivated garden provides the conditions for weeds to grow, the reason there are toxic leaders is that the culture provides the conditions for them to thrive. And just as a productive garden requires the ground to be prepared and tended, all actions must reinforce an organizational culture of respect, innovation, and trust which enhances productivity and high performance. Leaders are like gardeners and our organizations are the gardens. The political, security, economic ecosystem is changing. We cannot garden, that is, lead, as we always have. What should we do as strategic leaders?

Be a Gardener: Affirm Our Role as Leaders and Public Servants

First, it begins with our commitment as public servants. As leaders, we are custodians of the organizational culture. Or, put another way, we are gardeners creating the conditions for our organizations and our team members to thrive and produce, attending to both results and respectful interaction. In Covey’s words, “Leadership is getting results in ways that facilitate trust”. What does it mean to be a gardener, i.e., a public servant? It means that your personal conduct sets the example and you reinforce the behaviors of a culture that balances results and respect, demonstrating credibility and facilitating the public trust. Leader’s care for the organization similar to a gardener: feeding the garden (administering resources), minding the
Feed the Garden: Reinforce the Culture with Values and Resources

A productive gardener prepares the soil into which the plants will be planted. After planting, the gardener does leave the plants to themselves but continuously nurtures the plants. In the same way, a leader must prepare and feed the culture of the organization by reinforcing the values and distributing resources to those individuals and teams who not only get results but who get them in ways that reflect the values.

Eliminating toxic leadership that sabotages performance requires leaders to reinforce the values consistently and persistently in a variety of ways. Leaders cannot assume that the mission, vision, and core values will permeate the culture just because they are posted in the headquarters or in the breakrooms. Posting the values and expecting automatic adherence is like planting a garden and watering initially but not thereafter, which of course results in a dead, unproductive, weed-infested garden. The organization must keep the values in the forefront, including them in all forms of internal and external communication and messaging so that team members, customers, and stakeholders know the intended culture of the organization and the expected behavioral norms. In every email, correspondence, publication, conversation, announcement, and meeting, leaders should refer explicitly to the values, ensuring an obvious connection between the values and actions. Additionally, the organization should consider the values in all decisions, policies, and procedures ensuring consistency. In other words, leaders must clarify for team members, customers, and stakeholders how the core values should be reflected in email, interpersonal relationships, collaboration, innovation, execution of the mission, management of resources, response to crises, measure success, reprimands and correction, and recognition and praise of high performance. As Kusy and Holloway assert,

Toxicity will be significantly reduced in organizations that clearly define values in concrete ways, identify the kinds of behaviors the organization will and will not tolerate, and have a clear set of consequences when an individual does not live up to the values. Of course, the leader must model these behaviors as well. Walking the talk is the key.42

In other words, the values must permeate and guide all aspects of the organization and leaders must intentionally reinforce and integrate them.

When creating a culture of respect and results, a leader allocates resources based not only on results but also on respect and innovation. Resources reinforce behavior.43 If a leader only provides resources to the high performers, who may get results through toxic methods, the leader reinforces results at all costs and a toxic culture. Leaders need to resource those teams and units that promote dignity and respect in order to reinforce a culture of respect. Respect and its partner, security, are like soil. Each member of the organization has value and their worth should not be a matter of debate. Leaders feed the culture by communicating the garden (monitoring the systems, processes, products, and services), and enlisting others to garden (recruiting, training, promoting, and selecting).
core values, like providing hydration to the plants by watering the soil. Just as plants need air, team members need meaningful, healthy interaction and purposeful work. The leaders and organizations must ensure that performance is not constrained by hostility, conflict, and busy work but enhanced by cohesion, mutual purpose, and team achievement. Also, as light enables a plant to convert nutrients and water from the soil into growth, the leader ensures that the organization has the light of appreciation for performance that is both respectful and productive. An excellent guide for clarifying expectations, reinforcing positive behavior, and correcting negative behavior is Ken Blanchard’s The One Minute Manager.44

Mind the Garden: Monitor the Systems, Processes, Products, and Services

Just as an unattended garden will have weeds so also an unattended organization will have toxic systems and people. A leader attends to the behaviors and practices of subordinates, the processes of achieving results, and the results themselves. Just as a productive gardener has muddy boots, an effective leader gets around and observes the culture. A leader confronts and corrects inappropriate behavior, looks for policies and procedures that constrain innovation, growth, and productivity. What are some signs of disease and pests? Symptoms of toxic leadership include: sarcasm, public humiliation, spreading rumors, unproductive meetings, unwillingness to contribute constructive feedback, avoidance and withdrawal, suppression of bad news, processes slow down, and a results-biased, zero defects mentality. On the other hand, healthy behaviors include: respectful and constructive criticism; transparency and openness; a willingness to voice dissent, confront reality, and suggest improvements; initiative for experimentation, exploration, and innovation; practicing accountability; mutual praise, appreciation, and encouragement.

Develop Other Gardeners: Recruit, Select, Train, and Promote

A leader cannot grow and empower an organization alone. One-dimensional, one-directional micromanagement constrains productivity and innovation. The most effective organizations are those in which all members are empowered and are expected to attend to both the culture and the mission. The leader must never underestimate the team members’ influence on the culture, and make it a top consideration when recruiting and hiring new team members, selecting for key positions, training for increased performance, and promoting to increasing responsibility. Recruiting and hiring should not only consider past performance and skills but also values-based behavior such as respect, integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness. Selection for a key position usually involves specialized and expanded influence indicating the selectee’s behavior should be consistent with organizational values.

The present and future environment will consist of expanded technology and individual expertise. Instead of creating a bureaucracy of control-based management and leadership that will constrict productivity, organizations will need to create a strong culture to clarify expectations and to guide the actions of team members. Organizations will need leaders with capabilities for the changing environment; leaders who are: not authoritarian but empowering, not individuals but the culture, not controlling but extending trust, not standardization but facilitate innovation, not just lawful but ethical. Leader development will need to train leaders
to create a culture of respect, accountability, trust and innovation. Practice deliberate role-modeling, teaching, and coaching.

Promotions recognize an individual’s past and present performance and potential for increased responsibility. The qualities and character of the individual an organization promotes reinforces behavioral norms – either results-biased and ignoring values, a balance of results and respect, or some variation. Organizations that address toxic leadership do not reward results obtained by the toxic weeds of excessive controls, incivility and disrespect, but eliminate a zero defects attitude. They attend to, reward, and measure respect, innovation, and non-linear, adaptive thinking, on a regular basis. They promote those who get results in ways that facilitate trust. Additionally, senior leaders attend to those subordinates who sabotage the culture, documenting their counterproductive behaviors, and actively pursuing legal courses of removal.

The Payoff

Organizations that reinforce a culture of respectful engagement, diminish toxic leadership, empower innovation and create multi-directional and multi-level high-trust among leaders and followers and team members. High-trust organizations earn almost three times as much return to shareholders as low-trust organizations.\textsuperscript{45} In 2005, Fortune Magazine identified the 100 Best Companies to Work For, the criteria of which included 60 percent elements of trust. During the previous seven years, these 100 collectively earned four times the returns of the broader market.\textsuperscript{46} Schools that reinforce a culture of trust characterized by respect, personal regard, core competencies, and personal integrity are three times more like to improve scores on standardized tests.\textsuperscript{47} Organizations that develop outsourcing contracts based on trust as contrasted with punitive actions and penalties reap a trust dividend of up to 40 percent of the contract’s total value.\textsuperscript{48} While subject of this Warwick Business School study is external stakeholders, it seems plausible that similar dividends would result from reinforcing trust and respect internally. Workers who practice respect and civility are one and a half times more likely to have others want to work with them while disrespectful and uncivil workers are three times more likely to have others not want to work with them.\textsuperscript{49} Compared to uncivil and disrespectful people, respectful and civil people are 59 percent more likely to have information shared with them, 72 percent more likely to have others seek their advice, 57 percent more likely to have others seek information from them, inspire 71 percent to work harder, and 73 percent more likely for others to want to do well for them.\textsuperscript{50} There are clear indications that healthy, respectful leadership enhances performance.

While there is a dearth of research on the benefits of a culture of respect and trust, there is abundant research on the detriments of cultures of toxicity and abuse. At the very least, by eliminating toxic leadership, organizations would (1) remove distractions, enabling team members to focus on the mission; (2) reduce the waste of resources, time, health costs, legal costs, and replacement costs; (3) remove constraints, empowering team members to discover emerging innovative solutions; and (4) Win the War against threats, fraud, waste, and abuse.
The Conclusion/Invitation

What will it take to get serious about toxic leadership? Will it take the threat of organizational survival or irrelevance due to waste, the persistence decline of resources and team members and more calls for “doing more with less”? By failing to address toxic leadership, by tolerating and enabling it for short-term gains and personal benefits, by excusing the behavior of abusive supervisors, and by reinforcing a culture of extreme bias toward results, organizations are wasting resources at an astronomical rate which cannot continue. One estimate is that toxic leadership cost the DoD $4.7 billion in 2017, including, wasted time and resources, health care, and replacement of employees.\(^{51}\) What will convince leaders to pay attention to the conditions they create, to be stewards of the professional military and public service ethic, to tend and mind the organization, and to teach others to lead in ways that create trust?

Organizations would be so much more effective if leaders and team members not only refrained from disrespectful, degrading, and hostile behavior, but if they intentionally treated each other with dignity, respect and civility. In this era of tight budgets, instead of cutting costs and team members and “doing more with less”, organizations should create cultures of respectful engagement as the strategy for conserving resources and increasing performance. Organizations must stop overemphasizing the mission and ignoring respect, saying “We don’t have time to be civil.” In fact, we cannot afford not to be civil.\(^{52}\)

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\textit{Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not an official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.}

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