



Toxic Leaders

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

We are all familiar with the word "toxic" and recognize that toxic substances are known to cause human beings serious injury or death. We are also aware that some individuals have mastered the skill of being toxic to other people. When a toxic person is the leader of an organization, the performance of that unit will typically be less than half what it would be under a leader who builds trust. There is documented evidence (see Trust Across America statistics) that high trust groups outperform low trust groups by a factor of two to five times.

Thankfully, the majority of leaders are not toxic. One estimate given by LTG Walter F. Ulmer in an article entitled "Toxic Leadership" (Army, June 2012) is that 30-50% of leaders are essentially transformational, while only 8-10% are essentially toxic. The unfortunate reality is that one toxic leader in an organization does such incredible damage, he or she can bring down an entire culture without even realizing it.

Why would a leader speak and behave in a toxic way if he or she recognizes the harm being done to the organization. Is it because leaders are just not aware of the link between their behaviors and performance of the group? Is it because they are totally unaware of the fact that their actions are toxic to others? Is it because they are lazy and just prefer to bark out orders rather than work to encourage people? While there are instances where any of these modes might be in play, I think other mechanisms are responsible for most of the lamentable behaviors of toxic leaders.

Toxic leaders do understand that people are generally unhappy working under them. What they fail to see is the incredible leverage they are leaving off the table. They just do not believe there is a better way to manage, otherwise they would do that. If you are in an organization, there is a possibility you are in daily contact with one or more toxic leaders. There are three possibilities here: 1) you have a leader working for you who is toxic, 2) you are a toxic leader yourself, but do not know it or want to admit it, or 3) you are working for a toxic leader or have one higher in the chain of command. I will give some tips you can use for each of these cases.

Toxic Leader Working for you - this person needs to become more aware that he or she is operating at cross purposes to the goals of the organization. Do this through education and coaching. Once awareness is there, then you can begin to shape the behavior through leadership development and reinforcement. It may be that this person is just not a good fit for a leadership role. If the behaviors are not improved, then this leader should be removed.

You are a toxic leader - it is probably not obvious to you how much damage is being done by your treatment of other people. They are afraid to tell you what is actually going on, so you are getting grudging compliance and leaving their maximum discretionary effort unavailable to the organization. The antidote here is to genuinely assess your own level of toxicity and change it if you are not happy with the answer. This can be accomplished through getting a leadership coach or getting some excellent training. Try to read at least one good leadership book every month.

You are working for a toxic leader - in my experience, this is the most common situation. It is difficult and dangerous to retrofit your boss to be less toxic. My favorite saying for this situation is, "Never wrestle a pig. You get all muddy and the pig loves it." So what can you do that will have a positive impact on the situation without risking loss of employment? Here are some ideas that may help, depending on how severe the problem is and how open minded the boss is:

1. Create a leadership growth activity in your area and invite the boss to participate. Use a "lunch and learn" format where various leaders review some great books on leadership. I would start with some of the Warren Bennis books or perhaps Jim Collins' *Good to Great*.
2. Suggest that part of the performance gap is a lack of trust in higher management and get some dialog on how this could be improved. By getting the boss to verbalize a dissatisfaction with the status quo, you can gently shape the issue back to the leader's behaviors. The idea is to build a recognition of the causal relationship between culture and performance.
3. Show some of the statistical data that is available that links higher trust to greater productivity. The Trust Across America Website is a great source of this information.
4. Bring in a speaker who specializes in improving culture for a quarterly meeting. Try to get the speaker to interface with the problem leader personally offline. If the leader can see some glimmer of hope that a different way of operating would provide the improvements he or she is seeking, then some progress can be made.
5. Suggest some leadership development training for all levels in the organization. Here it is not necessary to identify the specific leader as "the problem," rather,

discuss how improved leadership behaviors at all levels would greatly benefit the organization.

6. Reinforce any small directional baby steps in the right direction the leader inadvertently shows. Reinforcement from below can be highly effective if it is sincere. You can actually shape the behavior of your boss by frequent reminders of the things he or she is doing right.

It is a rare leader who will admit, "Our performance is far off the mark, and since I am in charge, it must be that my behaviors are preventing people from giving the organization their maximum discretionary effort." Those senior leaders who would seriously consider this statement are the ones who can find ways to change through training and coaching. They are the ones who have the better future. Most toxic leaders will remain with their habits that sap the vital energy from people and take their organizations in exactly the opposite direction from where they want to go.

Another key reason why toxic leaders fail to see the opportunity staring them in the face is a misperception about Leadership Development. The typical comment is, "We are not into the touchy-feely stuff here. We do not dance around the maypole and sing Kum-bayah while toasting marshmallows by the campfire." The problem here is that several leadership training methods in the past have used outdoor experiential training to teach the impact of good teamwork and togetherness. Senior leaders often feel too serious and dignified for that kind of frivolity, so they sit in their offices and honestly believe any remedial training needs to be directed toward the junior leaders.

To reduce the impact of a toxic leader, follow the steps outlined above, and you may be able to make a large shift in performance over time while preserving your job. You can even use this article as food for thought and pass it around the office to generate dialog on how to chart a better future for the organization.



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