# Toxic Leadership: A Conceptual Framework[1]

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Toxic leadership refers to a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers, alike. Defining toxic leaders can prove vexing, at best, since one individual's toxic leader is another's heroic savior, given that context, history, and perspective weigh heavily in such judgments.

To capture the complexity of toxic leadership, we need a multidimensional framework. Such a framework should address toxic leaders' intentionality, the intensity level of their toxicity, the types of destructive behavior in which they engage, the types of dysfunctional personal qualities that drive their decisions and actions, and the significance of the consequences of their decisions and actions.

With regard to intentions, those leaders who deliberately injure others or enhance themselves at others' expense we regard as ***intentionally*** toxic. They stand in contrast to ***unintentionally*** toxic leaders, whose careless or reckless actions, including incompetence, nonetheless cause significant negative effects.

To complicate matters, any individual toxic leader does not necessarily operate at the same level of toxicity, nor use the same destructive behaviors, nor act through the same dysfunctional characterological mechanisms all of the time, even in comparable circumstances. For that matter, a particular toxic leader may act very toxically in some, but benignly in other situations. Consequently, the type and degree of harmful consequences that an individual toxic leader generates may vary from one situation to another.

In addition, when we compare different toxic leaders, it is apparent that they exhibit diverse types of destructive behavior, dysfunctional personal qualities, and degrees of toxicity. Besides, the consequences of their toxic decisions and actions also may differ considerably.

**The Behaviors of Toxic Leaders**

Toxic leaders, who initially charm, but ultimately manipulate, mistreat, and undermine their followers, engage in a wide range of destructive behaviors. We shall consider as "toxic leaders" those individuals who engage in one or more of the following behaviors:

- Leaving their followers (and sometimes non-followers) worse off than they found them by deliberately undermining, demeaning, seducing, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, disenfranchising, incapacitating, imprisoning, torturing, terrorizing, or killing them;

- Violating the basic human rights of their own supporters and others;

- Engaging in corrupt, criminal, and/or other unethical activities;

- Deliberately feeding their followers illusions that enhance the leader's power and impair the followers' capacity to act

independently, including depicting themselves as the only one who can "save" the followers;

- Playing to the basest fears and needs of their followers;

- Stifling constructive criticism and teaching supporters (sometimes by threats and authoritarianism) to comply with, rather than to question, the leader's judgment and actions;

- Misleading followers through deliberate untruths and misdiagnoses of issues and problems;

- Subverting those structures and processes of the system intended to generate truth, justice, and excellence and engaging in criminal acts;

- Building totalitarian or narrowly dynastic regimes, including undermining the legal processes for selecting and supporting new leaders;

- Failing to nurture other leaders, including their own successors (with the occasional exception of blood kin) or otherwise improperly clinging to power;

- Maliciously setting constituents against one another;

- Treating their own followers well, but persuading them to hate and/or destroy others;

- Identifying scapegoats and inciting others to castigate them;

- Structuring the costs of overthrowing them as a trigger for the downfall of the system they lead, thus further endangering followers and non-followers, alike;

- Failing to recognize or ignoring and/or promoting incompetence, cronyism, and corruption; and

- Behaving incompetently by misdiagnosing problems and failing to implement solutions to recognized problems.

Clearly, this lengthy, but incomplete, catalogue of behaviors starts at the intentionally malevolent end of the spectrum, where the toxic leader acts with deliberate negative, even evil, intent. At the end of the list, where personal incompetence and the inability to recognize it in others come into play, intentionality may be less salient, but harmful consequences occur nonetheless.

**The Personal Qualities of Toxic Leaders**

Discerning exactly where behavior -- such as frequent lying -- leaves off and characterological qualities -- such as dishonesty -- begin is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, certain enduring dysfunctional qualities of character mark the toxic leader:

- Lack of integrity that reveals leaders as cynical, corrupt, or untrustworthy;

- Insatiable ambition that prompts leaders to put their own sustained power, glory, and fortunes above their followers' well-being;

- Enormous egos that blind leaders to the shortcomings of their own character and thus limit their capacity for self-renewal;

- Arrogance that prevents toxic leaders from acknowledging their mistakes and, instead, leads to blaming others;

- Amorality that makes it nigh impossible for toxic leaders to discern right from wrong;

- Avarice that drives leaders to put money and what money can buy at the top of their list;

- Reckless disregard for the costs of their actions to others, as well as to themselves;

- Cowardice that leads them to shrink from the difficult choices; and

- Failure both to understand the nature of relevant problems and to act competently and effectively in situations requiring leadership.

Worst of all, perhaps, there are toxic leaders who combine several, or occasionally all, of these negative attributes and behaviors.


**Followers of Toxic Leaders**

Toxic leadership necessarily also depends upon the followers, many of whom recognize but tolerate it. Just why so many followers accept, often prefer, and sometimes even create toxic leaders by pushing non-toxic leaders over the line requires an analysis of three key sets of forces: those *internal* to the individual's psyche, those in the individual's *external* environment, and those *psychosocial* forces that arise from the interaction between the individual and his or her social environment.

The *internal* forces that push followers to tolerate toxic leaders are both *psychological*, that is, lodged in their psyches, and *existential*, that is, embedded in the followers' human condition. Strong yearnings for leaders percolate up from our unconscious, where *psychological* needs send us in search of leaders who can comfort our fears.

The psychological needs of the followers fall largely into Abraham Maslow's revised (1971) hierarchy of needs. At the most primitive end,

followers experience physiological needs for food, shelter, and other basic necessities of life. The hierarchy then progresses through needs for safety, love, esteem, cognition, aesthetics, and self-actualization, and culminates in transcendence.

The psychological needs most relevant to our yearning for leaders are structured as a need for authority figures to replace our parents and other early caretakers; for membership in the human community; for a conception of ourselves as significant beings consistently engaged in noble endeavors in a meaningful world; and for the hope that we can live at the center of action, where powerful leaders congregate to make important decisions. Our fears that we are personally powerless to challenge bad leaders also contribute to our reluctance to confront them. These and still other psychological needs make followers seek and respond to leaders who assure us they can fulfill those longings.

Followers are also driven by more *pragmatic* needs. Thus, we often stay with toxic leaders because working for them fulfills an assortment of practical needs – like shelter, food, and doctor's bills – that appear at the lower end of Maslow's hierarchy. Counted among such pragmatic needs is our desire to share in additional attractive benefits, like political access and organizational perks that toxic leaders can provide. Incidentally, these pragmatic needs are the ones we most easily recognize and commonly cite as the factors that hinder our escape from toxic leaders. There are, however, other profound needs sequestered more deeply in our unconscious.

The *second* set of internal needs, our *existential* needs, stems from the painful awareness of our own mortality. The tension between the certainty of our death and the uncertainty of when and how it will occur generates what philosophers have called "existential angst."  The consoling hope that our existence will have served some meaningful purpose allows us to move forward, without succumbing to paranoia and despair.  Toxic leaders mollify this desire by persuading us that we belong to "The Chosen" (be they the White House staff, Navy Seals, members of the Aryan race, or simply country-club members).

Our existential anxiety and craving for a life of meaning render us exquisitely susceptible to leaders who insist that they can keep us safe, instill our lives with significance, and ensure our eternal life – either physically here or in another world, or symbolically in the memory of generations yet unborn. As their followers, we work endlessly on what psychoanalyst Otto Rank called our "immortality projects," be they a Thousand Year Reich or the rollout of next year's innovative product line.

Because continuously focusing on our angst would surely debilitate us, we tend to push our anxiety below our angle of vision. Buried in our unconscious, it relentlessly drives us to find relief in the form of toxic leaders, who dangle assurances of safety, meaning, and immortality before us.

A third set of needs, this time, *external,* stems from the *uncertain, disorderly world* in which we all live. As humans, we face non-stop uncertainty, change, turbulence, and crises. Living in a post 9/11 environment only

heightens our sensitivity to these forces and increases what sociologist Elemér Hankiss calls "situational fears." Added to our existential angst, these "situational fears" give rise to an increased need for certainty and orderliness. Leaders who promise us an orderly, predictable, and controlled world can seem very attractive when everything around us appears to be disintegrating.

Fourth, *psychosocial* needs arise from the interaction between the individual (replete with psychological needs, existential anxiety, and situational fears) and his or her demanding environment. More specifically, within any society, individuals must come to grips with their culture's norms for achievement in order to develop the self-esteem we all require to function effectively.

If we meet society's standards of achievement, our self-esteem grows. When we exceed those norms, others hail us as leaders and heroes, rarely distinguishing between the two. Since we tend to see ourselves through our society's eyes, we, too, believe our success signifies that we are potential leaders.

By contrast, when we fail to satisfy our culture's achievement norms, we have two major choices. We can join a sub-cultural group, with less exacting or even antithetical norms, like a gang or cult. Alternatively, we can crown as leaders others who *do* exceed mainstream norms. When we join up with these outstanding individuals, stronger and smarter than we are, we can feel vicariously accomplished, powerful, and protected.

Fifth, we humans have always lived in an *unfinished and unfinishable world*, a world in which the explanations our parents took for truth we recognize as partially incorrect or totally mistaken. Thus, in each era, certain knowledge is overwritten by newer, more accurate knowledge, thereby casting doubt upon related assumptions. Moreover, just when we thought the limits of human achievement had been reached in any given field, such as athletics, we watch someone shatter the previous record. Thus, the world stage is continuously set for would-be heroes and leaders to reach for immortal achievements.

A related force -- the unique threats and challenges of each historical moment – sounds another call to leadership and heroism. In one era, bubonic plague sweeps the world. In another, AIDS decimates the population. Thus, each historical moment poses specific, urgent problems calling for solutions by those strong, smart, and spirited enough to take up the gauntlet. The intrepid individuals who meet these challenges are acclaimed heroes, whom we would follow to the ends of the earth.

Finally, there is another, more auspicious and quite relevant aspect of the human condition: our openness to the countless opportunities that lie before us. We are particularly taken by invitations to exceed the achievement norms of our society, at least vicariously. We remain open to the exhilaration of participating in a noble vision that will infuse our life with meaning and set us apart for all time as shining heroes – if only to our families.

**Grand Illusions and Noble Visions**

Illusions provide the primary mechanism by which toxic leaders keep followers in their thrall. These illusions speak to the complex needs and fears that threaten followers. Toxic leaders frequently offer followers grand illusions that articulate grandiose, unrealistic, and privileged Utopias. Participation in the toxic leader's grand illusion is open only to those the leader designates as "the Chosen" and only if they obey the toxic leader, who appears as their omniscient, omnipotent savior.

Followers frequently mistake these utopian dreams of toxic leaders for the more realistic, if difficult and risky, noble visions of *non*-toxic leaders. Such constructive leaders proffer noble visions as challenging pathways to meaning and ennoblement. In the political realm, of course, toxic leaders frequently employ the resources of government, including the military, to enforce their rule over more skeptical and less compliant followers.

**Rationalizations and Control Myths**

Hamstrung by their multiple needs, followers create *rationalizations* that convince them they *cannot* oppose the toxic leader. These rationalizations eventually harden into internalized *control myths*, dictating why the followers *should not* attempt to challenge the destructive leaders. While followers are busily engaged in controlling their own impulses to resist, toxic leaders pursue their unimpeded destructive courses.

**Opportunities for Escape: Personal and Organizational Options**

Individuals have numerous options, with differing degrees of difficulty, for unshackling themselves from toxic leaders.  They range from creating a coalition of like-minded followers to confront the leader, to calling in the

leader's boss or governing board, to whistle-blowing to the media or a regulatory agency, as well as leaving the organization that the toxic leader heads. All of these personal options demand that the followers take serious preparatory measures, from brainstorming with current and former followers, to engaging in internet and other kinds of research.

Organizational options begin with open and democratic procedures for selecting leaders. These include identification and selection processes that ensure the early elimination of individuals with toxic leadership propensities and/or histories. To preclude toxicity from setting in during that individual's term as leader, the organization should conduct periodic 360 degree reviews. Such reviews should include all relevant groups with whom that individual interacts. Open, regularly scheduled accountability forums at which the leader must explain his or her decisions and actions provide another organizational option for preventing or curtailing toxic leadership.

Still other organizational options serve as safeguards against toxic leadership. These include term limits that put both leaders and followers on notice that the leader's power is not endless. In addition, it may be useful to develop respectable departure initiatives to persuade entrenched leaders to step aside. Some organizations have designed a transition year, replete with appropriate organizational support, for the outgoing leader to record the history of his or her tenure, to act as a senior ambassador, or to use in other ways that might benefit the organization. Special precautionary measures also must be developed to protect whistle-blowers from retaliation. In addition, the organization might create on-going educational and growth opportunities for followers so that they may recognize and deal with anxiety,

crisis, change, and stress. The combination of these and other individual and organizational options can help to prevent or cut short the trajectory of toxic leadership.

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[1]This article draws substantially from Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 2005.