"So, does anyone else feel that their needs aren't being met?"

Toxic Leadership: Part Deux

Colonel George E. Reed, Ph.D., U.S. Army, Retired, and Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. Olsen, D.Min., U.S. Army, Retired

ASK A GROUP of military officers and noncommissioned officers if they have considered leaving the profession of arms because of the way a supervisor treated them, and, depending on their time in service, anywhere from a third to all of them will raise their hands to say yes. However, what we should recognize about such an informal polling process is that we are only addressing the survivors. We have no idea how many actually left, and whether those who chose to leave were talented contributors chased out by bad leadership or low performers not suited for a military career. Spend some additional time with those who raised their hands and, if you give them a chance to tell you, you will hear some tales of abuse that are inconsistent with a world-class organization. A professional and recruited force requires leadership that inspires, not dissuades, continuing service.

Colonel George E. Reed, Ph.D., U.S. Army, Retired, is an associate professor in the Department of Leadership Studies in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. He served 27 years as a military police officer including six as the director of Command and Leadership Studies at the U.S. Army War College. He welcomes contact from readers at george.reed@us.army.mil.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. Olsen, D.Min., U.S. Army, Retired, is an associate professor of Military Leadership at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS. He was formerly the executive officer of the Human Resources Command, St. Louis, MO. He holds a B.S. from Indiana University, a Masters in Counseling from the Assemblies of God Graduate School, and a Doctorate of Ministry in Leadership from Biola University. Dr. Olsen has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

ARTWORK: Tom Cheney, The New Yorker, 8 August 1997, © 2008 The New Yorker Collection from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

A Look Back

The essay "Toxic Leadership," published by *Military Review* in 2004, suggested that those in leadership positions who manifest destructive leadership styles represent a problem for the military.[1] It concluded that the interpersonal style of the leader is an important factor in determining organizational climate and effectiveness. The basis for the assertions in "Toxic Leadership" derived from a series of focus group interviews conducted at the U.S. Army War College in 2003.[2] The article defined toxic leadership as an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates, a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate, and a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest. It concluded with suggestions for future research, including a call for quantitative studies to determine the scope and nature of the problem. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief update on some key research in the area of toxic leadership, report the results of a recent study that focused on mid-grade officers at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), and address some issues that have arisen during discussions on this topic.

"Toxic Leadership" resulted in a deluge of emails to the author wherein readers reported their painful experiences with bullying bosses. The horrific stories of abuse and humiliation were compelling, but they were also anecdotal. Reactions to the article were enthusiastic among mid-grade and junior officers, but there was considerably less interest in the subject among senior officers who actually had the power and authority to drive policy change. Senior officers tended to believe that the problem of destructive leadership used to be much worse than it is today. Most of those surveyed at the Army War College (54.6 percent) felt that there is less destructive leadership today than five years ago. They could easily relate stories of abuse at the hands of superiors, but tended to relate to them as a rite of passage with little connection to contemporary reality. The view from the top of the organizational hierarchy is apparently rosier than at the bottom.

We sought to further test this assertion, and to answer some basic questions about the relationship between experiences with bad leaders and various measures of satisfaction and inclination among mid-grade officers to remain in service. Before reporting the results of some survey research conducted at CGSC in 2008, we will briefly review some of the recent literature on toxic leadership.

Bad Leadership in Perspective

Most of the books and articles written about leadership tend to focus on the traits, skills, and behaviors exhibited by good leaders. This positive view of leadership is appropriate since good leadership provides value to organizations. Bad leaders are fortunately the exception rather than the rule. However, as Harvard professor Barbara Kellerman asserted in her 2004 book, *Bad Leadership,* "Anyone not dwelling in a cave is regularly exposed, if only through the media, to people who exercise power in ways that are not good."[3] She provided a helpful typology of bad leadership that included headings such as: incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil. Clearly, there are many ways to be a bad leader. While she recognized that the cost of bad leadership is difficult to determine, she advocated against ignoring or accepting it and for learning more about it, so we can "attack it as we would any disease that damages, debilitates, and sometimes even kills."[4]

In 2005, Jean Lipman-Blumen published what we consider the definitive work on the topic. In *The Allure of Toxic Leaders,* she suggested a disturbing reason why there seem to be so many bad leaders in our midst. She asserted that followers actually enable toxic leaders and that organizations often not only tolerate them, but also produce and sustain them. She defined toxic leaders expansively, as "having the effect of poison" and focused on their negative impact.[5] For Lipman-Blumen, it is the significant and enduring harm that follows toxic leaders that defines them.

Kissing up and Kicking Down

Stanford Professor Robert Sutton explores the phenomenon in his 2007 book, *The No Asshole Rule.* He postulates two criteria for determining whether one is dealing with a bad leader whom he colorfully refers to as "an asshole":

- After talking to the alleged asshole, does the "target" feel oppressed, humiliated, de-energized, or belittled by the person? In particular, does the target feel worse about him or herself?
- Does the alleged asshole aim his or her venom at people who are *less powerful* rather than at those who are more powerful?[6]

Sutton notes that toxic leaders tend to "kiss up" even as they "kick down," which partially explains why the negative impact of their leadership style is not consistently recognized by their superiors. We know that the superiors often have an inflated view of their skills and ignore negative aspects of their leadership style.[7] Sometimes leaders overestimate their own ability to identify the impact of their subordinates' actions and fail to step in when subordinates exhibit toxic tendencies. The superior might see some behaviors as merely "a bit rough" and fail to see the full measure of the suffering experienced in the ranks.

We are not advocating "warm and fuzzy" leadership where we never raise our voices. There is a place for a rough style of leadership under certain conditions. Even Robert Sutton indicates that there are times when every leader needs to play the asshole.[8] There is nothing quite so effective as a well-timed and well-acted fit by the boss, so long as he does not overuse such

Beetle Bailey ©2010 King Features Syndicate. Used with the permission of King Features Syndicate and the Cartoonist Group. All rights reserved.

techniques or apply them in such a way as to harm unit effectiveness. The art of leadership involves applying the right interpersonal technique as the situation and needs of the followers demand.[9] When the enemy is in the wire and you are down to the last rounds of ammunition, it is not the time to call for a focus group. It is rarely appropriate, however, to use humiliating, demeaning, and belittling behavior.

Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway made a bold and disconcerting statement after they conducted a national research study using both interviews and surveys: "Toxic people thrive only in a toxic system."[10] Their exploration of toxicity in organizations highlights the role of system dynamics and organizational culture in promoting toxic behavior. They suggest that despite the fact that organizational leaders may not intend to create an environment conducive to toxic personalities, their lack of attention and ignorance of the problem enables toxic behavior. Toxic personalities exist in organizations because people tolerate them, change to accommodate them, or protect them.

A recent study by Richard Bullis and George Reed surveyed the U.S. Army War College class of 2008 and found that senior military officers at the grades of lieutenant colonel and colonel frequently reported experiences with destructive leadership.[11] Colonels reported experiencing less toxic leadership than lieutenant colonels, and GS 15s experienced it less than GS 14s. The study suggested that branches of the service (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps) experience toxic leadership at comparable rates, and the experiences did not vary significantly by race or gender. Civilian employees and U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard officers reported that they experienced more toxic leadership than did their active-duty military counterparts. Of particular interest in this study was the finding that while all measures of satisfaction declined when respondents experienced toxic leadership, such bad experiences did not necessarily translate to an inclination to leave military service. In other words, senior military officers reported that they suffered under toxic leaders, but they did not necessarily choose to leave because of those experiences. We might hypothesize that they so identified with their roles and found their positions so gratifying that bad leadership from their bosses was not enough to move them into another line of work. It is also possible that they had many years of good leadership experience to offset the negative experiences.

We replicated the survey approach taken by Bullis and Reed at the U.S. Army War College and submitted a questionnaire to the Command and General Staff College class of 2009. The survey asked them to identify leadership behaviors that they experienced in the 12 months preceding the course. The survey was administered electronically over January and February 2009 and garnered 167 usable responses. Unlike the War College class, which included civilian employees and all branches of the armed forces, the CGSC study included only active-duty Army majors. Of the 167 respondents, 156 were male and 11 were female. Respondents included 12 African-Americans, 3 Native Americans, 11 Asians/Pacific Islanders, and 5 who identified themselves as "Other."

When asked the question, "Have you ever seriously considered leaving your service or agency because of the way you were treated by a supervisor?" more than half (102 or 61 percent) responded positively.[12] Deciding whether to stay in a profession is a complicated matter, so we also asked respondents to imagine that they were under no service obligation and then indicate how likely it was that they would choose to remain in the Army. Most respondents indicated that they were inclined to remain in service as follows: very likely = 35.9 percent; likely = 40.1 percent; neutral = 10.8 percent; unlikely = 11 6.6 percent: and very unlikely = 6 percent. We find it encouraging that 76 percent of the class indicated that they were likely to remain in service, but we are concerned that 24 percent of the class was either undecided or negatively disposed to remain in service. We conducted a regression analysis to determine if there was a relationship between experiences with toxic leadership and an inclination to remain in service. We found that, unlike the U.S. Army War College class, these mid-grade officers were significantly less inclined to remain in service when they experienced toxic leadership.[13] Mid-grade officers in this population who experienced toxic leadership tended to look for an exit.

We modified an existing survey instrument to measure the specific negative leadership behaviors experienced by the class of 2009. Blake Ashforth's "Petty Tyranny in Organizations" scale was useful because it provided a list of 43 behaviors with headings such as "playing favorites" and "belittling or embarrassing subordinates."[14] We asked members of the class to indicate how often they experienced these behaviors in the 12-month period preceding their arrival at the course. Response options included "very seldom," "seldom," "sometimes," "often," and "very often."

The top 15 most-experienced negative leadership behaviors on the Army War College list showed remarkable consistency with the experiences of mid-grade officers. Yelling at subordinates was a nearby number 16 on the War College list. In all cases, the Army War College mean scores and standard deviations were lower, providing additional support to the notion that experience with toxicity decreases as rank increases, and that senior officers experience less variation in leadership style from their superiors.

Case Studies and Surveys as Indicators

Two recent cases drawn from media reports serve to demonstrate the problem of toxic leadership in stark detail. The *Army Times* reported a case of misuse of authority by four noncommissioned officers in Iraq that resulted in at least two court martial convictions for cruelty and maltreatment. In this case, a group of sergeants allegedly engaged in a campaign of "verbal abuse, physical punishment, and ridicule of other Soldiers."[15] The investigation was initiated because of the death of a private who was in the unit only 10 days before he committed suicide. In another case, a Navy captain was relieved of duty for cruelty and maltreatment of her crew.[16] According to a report by *Time*, "her removal has generated cheers from those who had served with her since she graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1985."[17] This latter case is useful for pointing out the degree to which members hold the organization accountable for toxic leaders. While an investigation by the Navy's Inspector General documented many instances of humiliation, "even greater anger seems directed at the Navy brass for promoting such an officer to positions of ever-increasing responsibility."[18] Both of these cases were extreme examples where the chain of command eventually acted. In the former case, however, it was not the unit climate but the death of a Soldier that prompted the inquiry. In the latter case, a pattern of perceived abuse resulted in a series of anonymous complaints from the crew that prompted the command to investigate. In light of the findings of the Army War College and CGSC studies, we suggest that much toxic behavior in military units goes undetected or without organizational response.

When members of the CGSC class of 2009 were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement "My service's evaluation and selection system is effective in promoting its best members," 6.6 percent strongly disagreed; 24.6 percent disagreed; another 24.6 percent neither agreed or disagreed; 39.5 percent agreed; and 4.2 percent strongly agreed. Those who experienced toxic leadership reported that they were significantly less satisfied with pay and benefits; relationships with coworkers, supervisors and subordinates; the kind of work

they did; and their jobs. While we would expect to see dissatisfaction with supervisors under toxic leadership, it is interesting to note that those who experienced toxic leadership reported lower satisfaction on every measure included in the survey. Toxic leaders apparently cast a wide and destructive wake of dissatisfaction.

We asked members of the class to recall the situation that caused them to seriously consider leaving the profession and then provide information about the supervisor in question. From these responses, we were able to identify a "hit parade" of behaviors these mid-grade officers viewed as particularly problematic. When asked how long ago the incident took place, the most common answer was one to three years ago (24.6 percent). Most of the time the toxic leader was their immediate supervisor, a male of the same specialty and race, and a captain or major. The behaviors most often checked as problematic included: having an arrogant or superior attitude (49.7 percent); unreasonably holding subordinates accountable for matters beyond their control (48.5 percent); wanting things done his or her own way or no way (44.9 percent); valuing his or her career over the good of the organization (40.1 percent); losing his or her temper (35.9 percent); and ignoring required counseling activities (31.1 percent).

Because 360-degree feedback and climate surveys have been touted as a tool to combat toxic leadership, we asked members of the class to indicate their experiences with assessments that considered responses from supervisors, peers, and subordinates. More than half (61.7 percent) indicated that they had the opportunity to participate in a unit climate survey in the unit to which they were assigned before reporting to the course. Opinions varied as to whether the survey was effective. Thirty respondents reported that it was effective (very effective and effective combined) and 54 indicated that it was ineffective (very ineffective and ineffective combined). This response could indicate dissatisfaction with surveys that are administered to no positive effect. Pro forma use of such tools can falsely raise expectations that are dashed when the results fail to prompt change. When asked about 360-degree feedback instruments, a smaller number reported having experience with them (25.1 percent). Of these, 24 indicated that they were effective, and 11 indicated that they were ineffective. We might conclude that both climate surveys and 360-degree feedback instruments are under-used in this population, and that these findings indicate that there is room for improvement on how the chain of command uses the data.

…much toxic behavior in military units goes undetected or without organizational response.

To determine a sense of the kind of leadership that these mid-grade officers were receiving from their superiors, we asked them to think about lieutenant colonels and colonels that they had personal experience with and then place them by percentage into four descriptive categories. In other words, we asked them to indicate the percentage of lieutenant colonels and colonels that fit four distinct descriptions. We provided narrative descriptions that ranged from very favorable to toxic. The good news is that the mean for the most favorable description was 48.68 percent. The bad news is that the mean for leaders described as toxic was 17.87 percent. At this point, we should note that there is insufficient cross-sector study of toxic leadership to establish what a good or a bad level of toxic leadership is. We simply have to ask whether it is satisfactory that almost 18 percent of the supervisors of mid-grade officers are considered by their subordinates to be a detriment to mission accomplishment with a leadership style so problematic that these subordinates would seriously consider exiting military service if they were asked to serve under them again.

Analysis and Evaluation

As with any research study, our approach had some methodological weaknesses. Because the response rate was low and the sample was relatively small, we advise caution when generalizing findings to the Army at large. We can only indicate that the data we have is suggestive and representative of a small but important group of mid-grade officers. We would be pleased if other researchers continue quantitative analyses

with larger populations. We have established that there is sufficient evidence to assert that experience with toxic leadership diminishes as one moves up the organizational hierarchy. We recommend additional studies at all levels to determine exactly the kind of leadership that Soldiers are experiencing and then to use that information to help improve leader development programs. Army leadership doctrine is generally sound, and the world would undoubtedly be a better place if all leaders practiced what Field Manual 6-22, *Leadership,* preaches. This study concludes that not all do, which presents an organizational problem worthy of a systemic response.

We draw no conclusions about the causes of toxic behavior at the individual level. That is rightly the domain of the fields of psychiatry and psychology, two of many fields in which we claim no expertise. We are more concerned with the actions an organization should take to monitor the kind of leadership that is actually being exercised on its behalf and how it should intercede when those in positions of authority fail to act in accordance with the organization's core values. We should recognize that we will probably never eliminate the problem of toxic leadership, but perhaps we can manage the problem in a better way.

Our first suggestion is more vigorous intervention to identify and deal with destructive leaders. The use of climate assessments and 360-degree feedback for development are good tools if used properly, yet our research indicates that there is room for improvement in the extent and method of their use. The corporate sector has made good use of executive coaching to modify executive behavior, but this approach has received little attention within the military. Military organizations tend to rely on the chain of command for coaching and evaluation, but this approach warrants additional scrutiny in the modular force where organizational charts are fluid and span of control (especially by senior raters) can be expansive. Supervisors do have an important role and should be alert for toxic tendencies in their subordinates. They should extend their gaze beyond short-term mission accomplishment to include the long-term health and welfare of the organization. It has never been sufficient to "get the job done" without casting an eye to "how it gets done."

Practical Conclusions

If you are still reading this article, you are probably thinking about the relationships that you have had with your supervisors and perhaps about how you have been mistreated. Our advice is to break out of that mode of thought. There is very little you can do about how you were (or are being) treated by your superiors. Toxic leaders are notoriously unconcerned with how their actions impact direct reports. Let it

DOD

A Soldier gives commands to subordinates during combat skills training, 6 February 2008.

go—except for the valuable lessons you learned about what *not* to do. Your time and attention is much better placed focusing on your subordinates and ensuring that toxic leadership does not find a place on your watch.

While we have an ethical obligation to develop leaders and provide them with an opportunity to learn and grow, at some point the efforts to develop and change the behaviors of toxic leaders need to end and the non-selections, eliminations, and reliefs for cause begin. To that end, it is necessary to collect data about leadership actions and provide hints of toxicity to centralized promotion and selection boards. As Kusy and Holloway sagely point out, it is not sufficient to merely fire toxic leaders, it is also necessary to identify and modify the systems that support and encourage them.[19]

Military cultural norms dissuade Soldiers from complaining about their supervisors, and for good reason. Loyalty is also an Army value. Yet, despite the very real possibility of retribution, Soldiers who conscientiously and courageously report toxic leaders do their fellow Soldiers a great service. Watchdog agencies and inspector generals' offices should be prepared not only to receive and respond to issues of command climate, but also to protect the whistleblowers.

We also recommend that the system of professional military education examine and use negative examples of leadership in addition to the stories of exemplary leadership that abound in our doctrinal publications. We can learn much from negative case studies, and stories of failure can be powerful influencers of organizational culture. Technical competence is no substitute for skill in the interpersonal domain where leadership takes place. Our professional schools, courses, and human resource systems will do well to place as much emphasis on building and maintaining effective teams as on honing combat skills.

Our Nation entrusts its military leaders with the most precious resource it has to offer—its sons and daughters who selflessly volunteer to serve, often at great personal hazard. Such patriotism deserves the very best leadership that we can muster. ***MR***

The authors would like to express their appreciation to Ms. Maria Clark of the Command and General Staff College Quality Assurance Office for her invaluable assistance in administering the questionnaire used in this study.

NOTES

1. George E. Reed, "Toxic Leadership," *Military Review* (July-August 2004): 67-71.
2. Craig Bullis and George Reed, "Assessing Leaders to Establish and Maintain Positive Command Climate," A Report to the Secretary of the Army (February 2003), 1.
3. Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 5.
4. Ibid., 243.
5. 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), 17-18.
6. Robert I. Sutton, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workforce and Surviving One that Isn't* (New York: Warner Business Books, 2007), 9.
7. Marshall Goldsmith, one of the world's most preeminent executive coaches, asserts that leaders often delude themselves about their achievements, status, and contributions. See *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 16-17.
8. Sutton.
9. This is the foundational concept of contingency theories of leadership such as Situational Leadership®, a well-known theory purveyed by the Center for Leadership Studies in Escondido, CA. For more information, see Paul Hersey, Kenneth H. Blanchard, and Dewey E. Johnson, *Management of Organizational Behavior*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, Prentice Hall, 2008).
10. Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway, *Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 10.
11. Bullis and Reed, "The Impact of Destructive Leadership on Senior Military Officers and Civilian Employees," *Armed Forces and Society,* 36 (1) (October 2009), 5-18.
12. Only 51 percent of the War College population indicated that they seriously considered leaving due to treatment by a superior; another indication that longevity might be associated with leadership style.
13. B= -.015, S.E. = .005, Wald 10.275, Sig. = .001, Exp (B) =.985.
14. Blake Ashforth, "Petty Tyranny in Organizations," *Human Relations* 47 (1997), 755-78.
15. JoAnne Viviano, "Staff Sgt. Convicted of Cruelty in Iraq," The Associated Press, 20 January 2010 in *Army Times*, <www.armytimes.com/news/2010/01/ap_army_cruelty_conviction.011810/> (5 March 2010). Also see Michelle Tan, "4 NCOs Charged With Cruelty Toward Soldiers," 23 August 2009 in *Army Times*, <www.armytimes.com/news/2009/08/army_Soldiers_cruelty_082109> (5 March 2010).
16. Mark Thompson, "The Rise and Fall of a Female Captain Bligh," *Time*, 3 March 2010, <www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,196902,00.html?xid=rss-topstories> (5 March 2010).
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Kusy and Holloway, 10-19.