

“Wherever we look upon this earth, the opportunities take shape within problems.”<sup>1</sup> In that vein, a crucible is a problematic situation that, though stressful while endured, upon reflection reveals opportunity for growth. My experience with a toxic subordinate in a deployed environment was a crucible experience for me, from which I continue to learn and, hopefully, grow. The experience taught me that one person can create stress within an organization, but a leader’s failure to address that person’s behavior magnifies the organizational stress exponentially. Additionally, I learned that if a leader steps away from the leadership role and becomes just another co-worker, it is difficult to establish a cohesive team and can damage the organizational climate.

“So did you, Ma’am. So did you.” I can still hear the raised, indignant voice of the junior captain, deflecting a criticism I had given him back to me. He had missed a deadline and his response was intended to point out the fact that he believed I had as well. It did not matter that I had not missed the deadline, or even that the deadline should not have been mine to miss. In that moment, I saw with crystal clarity that I had failed. He was a co-worker speaking to a colleague, with disdain no less, rather than a subordinate soldier speaking to a leader. And I could place the blame no where but on myself. In retrospect, there are several things I am proud of about my reaction. I did not lose control and maintained my composure, even while he lost his. I did not back down or let the comment pass, even though this would have been the least painful reaction. (Although I still have fantasies of handling it in a much more decisive, and perhaps brutal, way.) However, in that moment I could clearly see the path that had led us to this place, and each step I had failed to take to keep us from getting there.

This confrontation was the culmination of six months of a difficult situation. We were deployed and the captain was a reservist, who had arrived before our unit. Almost immediately upon my arrival, my section was assigned a project which involved designing a new course of action, where doctrine and regulations did not yet exist and we would be making up the process

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as we went along. He would be the primary action officer and I would be his support. While he was a talented officer, he had no practical experience in the area, so I thought this would allow me to keep close supervisory watch over the project, but still enable me to supervise the rest of the section.

This arrangement caused two problems. First, the captain had been described to me as a superstar performer who needed little supervision.<sup>2</sup> In reality, he was a civilian, called to active duty, who was using every moment of his deployed time to further his career, rather than having the best interests of the rest of the team at heart. He could be a superstar – when it suited his interests. He was purportedly staying at the office late to work on the project, arriving at work every morning at an increasingly late hour. What I have now come to realize is that he spent much of this time working on his civilian career, speaking with his wife, or working on outside projects that benefitted him. He had problems with his treatment of noncommissioned officers, treating them as second class servants, and did not get along with the other officers. Yet, I fell squarely into the decision-making trap of staying anchored to the initial description I had been given – that he was a star.

As a result, I waited much longer than I should have to counsel him and repeatedly gave him the benefit of the doubt. The unfortunate fallout of this was to greatly increase the stress caused to the office. I supervised over twenty other officers, most of whom were scattered the area of operations. However, CPT Smith and two others were in my office, the four of us literally sharing a tiny office seven days a week. Reflecting back, I can see how his behavior caused irritation and resentment in the other officers, but probably nothing like the consternation caused by my failure to correct the situation. I have learned to evaluate my subordinates myself

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<sup>2</sup> On the surface, we should have gotten along well – we both went to the same school at relatively the same time. He was less than a year younger than me. Most importantly, he had been called to active duty previously and served with many of my friends, all of whom gave him glowing recommendations. I came prepared to like him and, in retrospect, I believe it was this prejudgment that was a primary cause of my failure.

and not rely so heavily on the judgments of others. I also realize the impact one person's poor performance can have on an entire office, leading to a stressful and negative office climate that must be addressed at the earliest opportunity.

A second factor adding to the stress was my intimate involvement in the project, which consumed a majority of my time. There was no way for me not to have been heavily involved in the process, however, my decision to serve as one of the action officers had multiple effects which negatively impacted the climate of the office. Because I was so involved in this aspect of our operations, I was less effective at team building because I did not spend enough time focused on my officers and their actions. In effect, he and I became a team, working on this new and exciting issue, while the other members of the organization were virtually excluded. Moreover, I was so heavily involved in the details of one particular issue that I essentially acted as another action officer, rather than a supervisor. I was a worker, rather than a leader, which eventually allowed CPT Smith to take the attitude he did with me. I had unintentionally established a climate where I was little more than a manager, but not really a leader, and CPT Smith was seen as receiving special treatment.

From this experience, I have learned that it is important for a leader to maintain the vision and ability to be able to guide the entire organization, but not to focus on completing specific detailed tasks. At one point in the process, my supervisor asked me why I was so heavily involved in the project. He said, "We need to get you back into the management game." I remember wondering what he meant, thinking that it made perfect sense for me to be so involved, since I had ten years of experience in this particular area. I now understand.

From outer appearances, the deployment went well and I was successful at my job. My boss was happy, I got a great evaluation, and I still keep in touch with and mentor many of the officers I led. However, I know that I have much to improve upon. Seeing the effect of my failure to take corrective action when faced with destructive behavior by a subordinate has given me resolve to take immediate action in the future. Moreover, I needed this experience to

understand that, as a field grade officer, my job is not to write every memo or carry out every task. It is to develop and teach my subordinates to do those tasks; to see the bigger picture and how all of the details fit together to ensure that the organization as a whole functions well.