

Organizational Toxicity

Inner Circles of Harmful Leadership

FIL ARENAS

An examination of toxic leadership typically that reveals more than one lone organizational bully wreaks havoc on an institution. A look into elements of toxic leadership and a closer investigation of toxic followers or inner circles provide insights into the persistent staying power of toxic leaders, even in today's society of transparent social awareness and political correctness. Further, organizations must highlight ways to rid themselves of these abusive individuals and their willing entourages who inflict pain and suffering on individuals and organizations.

Have you ever complained about your boss to a friend only to find out that they have a similar story of someone who is equally abusive or maybe even worse? Everyone experiences bad moments in their daily lives when they may snap at someone or even lose their temper. Does that make that person abusive? Does that make that person a bully? Does that make that person toxic? Obviously, there is a huge gap between leaders who occasionally lose their patience and those who intentionally abuse their employees. Toxicity seems to be prevalent in all organizations; it must be understood before leaders can take steps to eradicate it.

Toxic leaders survive when they are supported by other leaders or toxic followers. A look at the relevant literature has revealed other types of abusive behaviors that are inextricably linked to toxic actions. This article will provide developing leaders with a background into harmful leadership and how it continues to thrive in organizations.

Background

In 2005, Jean Lipman-Blumen paved the way for academics and leadership researchers with her seminal work in the area of toxic leadership. She asserted that toxic leaders use a wide range of destructive behaviors to inflict enduring harm not only on their organizations, but also on their followers by damaging their morale, motivation, and self-esteem.

Further, her research considered the many levels of destructive and dysfunctional behaviors of a toxic leader that may include undermining, demeaning, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, incapacitating, imprisoning, terrorizing, and torturing their subordinates, alone or with the members of their entourage or inner circles.¹ Unfortunately,

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1. 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).

these egregious organizational behaviors continue nearly two decades after Lipman-Blumen's groundbreaking research.

A 2009 study defined toxic leadership as “destructive, disturbing, and dysfunctional acts of supervision that spread among members of the workplace.”² In 2015, an analysis specifically on leadership in the military noted, “There is no consensus definition among scholars who study toxic leadership.”³ Moreover, after a brief overview of bad leadership, it described toxic leadership as a much more egregious level of abuse akin to “abusive supervision, petty tyranny, workplace victimization, bullying, workplace psychopathy, brutal and intolerable bosses, harassers, incivility, derailed leaders, and destructive leadership.”⁴

Apart from the other branches of service, the US Army actually defined toxic leadership within the Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 in August 2012, their primary leadership manual:

Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on the subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. This leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves. The negative leader completes short-term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfill requests. This may achieve results in the short term, but ignores the other leader competency categories of *leads* and *develops*. Prolonged use of negative leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale.⁵

Interestingly, the US Army recently revised its doctrinal definition of toxic leadership, elaborating on the notion of counterproductive leadership in their updated 2019 version of ADP 6-22.⁶ Yet all of the behavior descriptions remain “toxic” based on extant research. This manual further delineates multiple examples under five broad categories: abusive behaviors, self-serving behaviors, erratic behaviors, incompetence, and corrupt behaviors. According to the Center for Army Leadership, the Army agreed that one factor negatively impacting readiness is toxic leadership. Additionally, it stated that the word “toxic” is

2. Alan Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 139.

3. George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 10.

4. Reed, 10–11.

5. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) No. 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, August 2012), 3.

6. HQDA, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, ADP No. 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2019).

considered a buzzword creating a lack of understanding regarding its meaning.⁷ As of this writing, the Army remains the only branch of service that has officially defined this type of leadership.

Scoping Abusive Leadership

Although there are many terms in the literature to describe abusive leadership in the United States, such as intimidation, toxic leadership, bullying, bad leadership, aggression, incivility, destructive behaviors, harassment, and many levels of abuse, this article considers these three closely related categories: workplace harassment, abusive conduct (bullying), and toxic leadership.⁸

Workplace Harassment

One of the earliest documented forms of destructive leadership, workplace harassment, is defined as “repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another.” It is “treatment which consistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person.”⁹

Abusive Conduct (Bullying)

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), workplace bullying is abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, and intimidating, often resulting in work sabotage or verbal abuse.¹⁰ A workplace bully is a global term that was defined at the turn of the twenty-first century and included harassment, intimidation, or aggressive or violent behaviors.¹¹ The most current *WBI US Workplace Bullying Survey* (2021) estimated 48.6 million Americans were bullied at work.¹²

Toxic Leadership

As Marcia Whicker, who coined the term toxic leadership in 1996, posited, such leaders are maladjusted, malcontent, malevolent, and malicious turf protectors who fight, control, and routinely tear down their followers as opposed to uplifting them. This type

7. Center for Army Leadership, “Talk Like a Leader,” US Army, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.capl.army.mil/>.

8. Theresa A. Daniel and Gary S. Metcalf, *Stop Bullying at Work: Strategies and Tools for HR and Legal Professionals* (Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management, 2016), 14.

9. Carroll M. Brodsky, *The Harassed Worker* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1976), 2.

10. “What is Workplace Bullying?,” Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://workplacebullying.org/>.

11. Daniel and Metcalf, *Stop Bullying at Work*.

12. Gary Namie, *2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey* (Clarkston, WA: WBI, 2021), 7, <https://workplacebullying.org/>.

of leader typically stifles productivity and often has a powerful negative influence on organizational growth.¹³

Organizational Toxins

As one leadership expert contends, toxins in an organization—resulting from emotional pain that remains mismanaged or unresolved—are a type of institutional poison. Although toxicity is a normal by-product of organizational life, it can spread to individuals or systems often undetected. Toxins—or toxic behaviors—are generated throughout the organization, as exemplified in the model of the Seven Deadly INs: intention, incompetence, infidelity, insensitivity, intrusion, institutional forces, and inevitability.¹⁴ Effective leaders should always remain vigilant for any traces of toxicity within their purview.

Table 1. Seven Deadly INs.¹⁵

TOXIN	DESCRIPTION
INtention	Deliberate malice
INcompetence	No emotional intelligence
INfidelity	Betrayal, untrustworthiness
INsensitivity	Lack of empathy
INtrusion	No work-life balance
INstitutional Forces	Bad policies, offensive rules of engagement
INevitability	Weak crisis management

Intention: The Role of Malice

For a variety of reasons, most toxic bosses intentionally create pain in their followers through the continual use of humiliation, undermining, degradation, or verbal attacks. The *WBI Workplace Bullying Survey* found that 65 percent of abusive employees ranked higher in the organization than their victims.¹⁶ These destructive leaders may inflict such pain on their subordinates as a control mechanism to prevent any challenges or resistance. Some leaders target specific individuals within their purview for their vindictive onslaught privately or publicly by criticizing their performance at any opportunity.

Eventually without intervention by higher authority, the follower's inevitable decline comes to fruition as they break down and are either terminated or quit. The primary purpose of malicious behavior by a leader in an organizational setting is to deliberately

13. Marcia L. Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1996).

14. Peter J. Frost, *Toxic Emotions at Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003), 5, 36–50.

15. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 36–50.

16. Namie, 14.

harm a particular person in order to fulfill a need to control or dominate. Some leaders may believe their use of malice is some form of motivation. Regardless of the reason, those on the receiving end of such toxic abuse suffer emotional scars from fear, anger, confusion, and resentment.¹⁷

Incompetence: Weak or Inadequate People Skills

Many leaders manage to rise to senior positions without any skills in building productive relationships, ironically becoming leaders of people without possessing people skills themselves. Leaders who are micromanagers or bad communicators, or who are cold, uncaring, unfeeling, out of touch, indecisive, moody, impatient, or arrogant lack the emotional intelligence (EI) skills to build productive relationships.¹⁸ By contrast, a leader who practices self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, as exemplified in one EI model, will be able to read the room and eventually feel the mood of their followers, creating powerful leader-follower dyads.¹⁹

Infidelity: The Act of Betrayal

Toxic leaders are infamous for taking credit for their followers' ideas. Effective communication between leaders and followers assumes psychological safety and trust; betrayal occurs when the subject matter or ideas shared are used (stolen) for the leader's benefit or advantage without the follower's approval or consent. In another form of mistrust, toxic leaders share private discussions concerning senior leaders, peers, or subordinates for personal gain. Supervisors using betrayal trigger emotional responses that lead to fear, bitterness, and mistrust, ultimately destroying leader-follower relationships.²⁰

Insensitivity: Lack of Emotional Intelligence

As described earlier, toxic leaders have lower levels of emotional intelligence that otherwise would foster positive relationships not only among their followers, but also throughout the organization. Effective leaders incorporate powerful relationship skills that may be leveraged in both work and personal lives. Further examination of the EI model illustrates how its four domains develop leaders. Self-awareness defines one's strengths, weaknesses, and emotional triggers while enabling the understanding of the impact on others. Self-management promotes honesty and integrity by maintaining emotional control through temperance. Social awareness helps us read the feelings and emotions

17. Frost, *Toxic Emotions*, 36–38.

18. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 39–40.

19. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).

20. Goleman, 40–41.

around us as well as our impact on others. Relationship management involves motivation and responsiveness to others, managing conflict, and practicing empathy.²¹

Intrusion

Toxicity of intrusion involves a superior who continually intrudes on a follower's personal time to accomplish so-called urgent tasks in the name of the organizational mission. This is a form of bullying. Work-life balance is a hot topic today, in a post-COVID environment where much of the workforce was sent home to work for nearly two years, routinely opening them up to after-hour interruptions. Although most workers were physically removed from the organization, telecommuting from home did not protect them from excessive bullying. The *WBI Workplace Bullying Survey* reported that in 2021, 61.5 percent of remote workers were affected by bullying—whether they were bullied themselves or witnessed bullying.²²

Potential violations of work-life balance, unless it is a life-threatening issue for one's occupation, include working during a holiday or special family event, or having a supervisor ask an employee to cancel vacation, evening, or weekend plans for a work project. Occasionally, the manipulating leader convinces a follower they are the only person who can save the day. These situations place a follower in a precarious position. If they refuse to accommodate their boss, they could suffer repercussions through administrative actions or risk termination. If they choose to acquiesce, it could be construed as a sign of weakness, allowing further bullying intrusions.²³

Institutional Forces: Contemporary Corporate Agendas

Toxic organizational policies or practices can offend or hurt the members they intend to protect. These institutional forces could appear as standards, rules, missions, visions, programs, or confusing directives from leaders. Further, this form of toxicity is usually unintentional but insensitive to the harm and impact on its members.²⁴

Inevitability

Future leaders must all face the fact that some emotional pain is inevitable regardless of their policies, leadership acumen, or level of emotional intelligence. In one personal example, a close colleague/friend went for a Sunday drive on a beautiful sunny day in the country on his new motorcycle and collided with a semi-trailer truck; he was killed instantly. My supervisor approached me that Monday morning in shock shortly after our colleague's wife had called him with the news of his death. The impact on our department was a

21. Goleman, 41.

22. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 8.

23. Namie, 44.

24. Namie, 45–46.

deeply painful experience. These types of unpredictable crises, such as tornadoes, plane crashes, bombings, murders, and the like, are not planned by bad leaders. Yet although leaders cannot control the onset of such disasters or crises, they can help determine the level and duration of pain through a proactive approach to crisis management planning.²⁵

The Role of Followers

After reviewing the lists of abusive behaviors utilized by toxic leaders it becomes difficult to believe anyone could be drawn to such harmful human beings. Lipman-Blumen describes six psychological needs that may be the catalyst for this kind of leadership, including toxic leaders. The following section briefly describes each of these psychological needs.²⁶

Authority Figures

The need to fill a void left by parents, teachers, and other past authority figures may allow individuals to accept controlling leaders in the present. People are shaped and conditioned by these initial leaders and caretakers through a variety of styles, cultures, values, and methodologies. Positive role models teach acceptable values and standards, while dysfunctional caretakers teach individuals to accept their negative examples.²⁷

Security

For many, leaving the family circle and becoming independent for the first time can be a frightening experience. The burden of freedom may be overwhelming as it sometimes results in feelings of isolation, loneliness, and powerlessness. When freedom produces a sense of loneliness and fear, individuals can gravitate toward any leader who will make them feel safe and secure again.

Feeling Chosen

Toxic leaders may offer promises of safety and security while making people feel special or “chosen” in some way, leaving followers vulnerable and easy targets for manipulation.²⁸ For many unsuspecting victims, the illusion of being chosen is one of the most compelling yet dangerous scenarios a leader can leverage. Many religious and political leaders have lured chosen followers into their web of deceit under the guise of security.²⁹ At the extreme

25. Namie, 47–48.

26. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 205, 29.

27. Lipman-Blumen, 30–31.

28. Lipman-Blumen, 34–35.

29. Lipman-Blumen, 35–36.

level, consider the mass suicides orchestrated by the Reverend Jim Jones in 1977, as he exploited his personal power as a parental figure to control his dependent followers.³⁰

Community

Another psychological force integral to not only accepting but also seeking out toxic leaders is an individual's "deep, positive human need for membership within a community."³¹ In addition to the need to feel special, most humans also have a strong need to belong.³² A chosen person is guaranteed membership into an elite group or community.

Ostracism and Social Death

Many individuals also experience the "dread of community's opposite face, ostracism and 'social death.'"³³ As opposed to a fear of physical death, the fear of social death may generate as much if not more anxiety within an individual. Social belonging is a powerful force, giving meaning and community acceptance to our lives.³⁴ Many followers hide dissent they may experience with a leader as their fears of possible isolation haunt them, forcing them to accept toxic leaders. Toxic leaders are especially adept at wielding ostracism or social death as weapons against discontented followers. Confronting toxic leaders is a risk for followers, and continuous resistance may lead to professional or social suicide.³⁵

Personal Weakness

Typically, followers of toxic leaders will acquiesce on topics or subject matter that they are completely against to avoid conflict. The fear of retaliation, humiliation, or termination is an additional psychological factor keeping followers from challenging their abusive leaders. Most followers feel too weak to challenge their leaders personally or their dysfunctional systems within organizations. Moreover, these followers feel alone and believe that contesting their harmful bosses would jeopardize their careers.³⁶

Toxic Leader Disciples

How do susceptible followers become toxic? Are some organizational structures more conducive to toxic interactions? The lack of understanding that most Americans have

30. Bernard M. Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 267.

31. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 35.

32. A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943), <https://psycnet.apa.org/>.

33. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 35.

34. Lipman-Blumen, 38–39.

35. Lipman-Blumen, 40.

36. Lipman-Blumen, 43.

about the day-to-operations of the US military has been called a “double-edged sword.”³⁷ The more successful the military is at executing its missions, the less interested the average citizen is in how the military does its job to defend the nation, leaving the military relatively free from excessive interference and scrutiny.

Unfortunately, toxic leadership is embedded in the framework of the profession of arms. Military culture places great emphasis on duty, a moral responsibility and obligation, regardless of the quality of the existing leadership. Military organizations provide structures that may “incubate and sustain toxic leadership,” allowing destructive leaders to thrive.³⁸ According to a 2010 study, “Toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments represent an unholy trinity that can lead to destructive outcomes,” also known as the toxic triangle.³⁹

Importantly, toxic leaders can be difficult to locate within organizations due to the protection of their loyal followers and corporate disciples; these harmful leaders do not act alone:

They are empowered by, fueled by, and serve as players in webs of destructive behavior populated by colleagues, executive boards, policy makers, customers, and stakeholders. Productivity, profits, and quarterly reports rule. The quality of human relationships is swept aside. Emotional intelligence becomes a footnote, an after-thought. Greed and power plays emerge.⁴⁰

In fact, the *Workplace Bullying Survey* discovered that in 2021, 21 percent of harmful bullies were actually the victim’s coworkers or peers.⁴¹

Leader-Member Exchange Connection

A closer look at a relevant leadership theory may help developing leaders understand how toxic followers and other disciples form high-quality exchange relationships. Although the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory has its roots in the early 1970s and has had several refinements over the last decades, the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower is still the most powerful influence on successful leadership. The premise behind LMX theory as a relationship-based approach holds that effective leadership grows when leaders and followers reach mature leadership relationships, or partnerships.

The earlier findings in the initial research described very different leader-follower interactions when dealing with the same leader. At one end of the spectrum, followers described so-called high-quality exchanges (in-groups), which involved high levels of trust, respect,

37. Reed, *Tarnished*, 4.

38. Reed, 48.

39. Paul W. Mulvaney and Art Padilla, “The Environment of Destructive Leadership,” in *When Leadership Goes Wrong: Destructive Leadership, Mistakes, and Ethical Failures*, ed. Brigit Shyns and Tiffany Hansbrough (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2010), 52–53.

40. Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders*, xviii.

41. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 14.

and obligation. In these high-quality exchanges followers were the equivalent of so-called trusted assistants for leaders. In low-quality exchanges (out-groups), members described low levels of trust, respect, and obligation. Since these followers were not viewed as trusted assistants or in-group members, they were treated as generic workers who simply conformed to their job descriptions and made no more effort.⁴²

When the high-quality exchanges blossomed into mature partnerships, both parties could count on each other for full loyalty and support. Further, the exchanges were not only behavioral, but also emotional with mutual respect, trust, and obligation, garnering nearly unlimited influence for the follower. Unfortunately, the followers with a low-quality exchange relationship had reduced access to the leader, resources, and growth opportunities.⁴³

Obviously not all in-groups foster toxic behaviors. The LMX theory helps unravel the complex relationships between toxic leaders and their followers. Attributions of toxicity will vary among followers based on their specific dyadic relationships; thus, some followers will not only tolerate bad leaders but also may “aid and abet” their toxic behaviors within organizations.⁴⁴ It is reasonable to surmise that because of the subjective nature of each leader-follower dyad, each relationship will be unique based on the compatibility of many factors, such as values, personality typology, expectations, and so forth. Many of these factors will help shape the type of leader-follower exchange, while also considering the follower’s needs described in earlier sections.

If the leader views the follower as competent, dependable, and likeable, the member will most likely share a high-quality exchange relationship with the leader and all of the benefits and rewards of that LMX status. In the case of toxic leadership, members who earn a high-quality exchange relationship with that leader trust the leader to act in their best interest and do not perceive the leader as harmful or threatening.

Conversely, subordinates that do not reach the same level of communication with their leader will most likely garner a low-quality exchange relationship with the leader and will not be entrusted with the same scope of responsibilities, resources, or access to the leader as in-group members. Followers at this level typically are less satisfied with their leaders and perceive them as ineffective. Moreover, these subordinates often feel distanced or excluded from the important work and are more likely to report their leader’s actions.

Members of the out-group are also likely to retaliate or respond to actions from the toxic leader, establishing a balance of equity stemming from the low-quality exchange relationship, unlike the protector mode demonstrated by in-groups.⁴⁵ The Leader-Member

42. George B. Graen and Mary Uhl-Bien, “Relationship-Based Approach to Leadership: Development of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory of Leadership over 25 Years: Applying a Multi-Level Multi-Domain Perspective,” *Leadership Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1995): 227.

43. Graen and Uhl-Bien, 232–33.

44. Kathie L. Pelletier, “Perceptions of and Reactions to Leader Toxicity: Do Leader-Follower Relationships and Identification with Victim Matter?,” *Leadership Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2012): 413.

45. Pelletier.

Exchange theory illustrates how leader-follower dyads are formed within toxic or nontoxic relationships. The trust and loyalty of in-groups support both sides of the spectrum.

Leader's Entourage

In addition to the leader-member exchange groups, the leader's entourage is another support system for toxic and nontoxic leaders. The most powerful group of followers according to Lipman-Blumen is the leader's entourage. This tightly knit group is analogous to President John F. Kennedy's "Irish Mafia," a select few entrusted friends—and his brother, Bobby—who were in key administration roles during his term. The overall functions of the entourage are to protect the leader, gather information, and act as trusted key advisers on a daily basis. Additionally, the entourage will shield the leader from any harm or blame under any circumstances and will voluntarily take the blame for any wrongdoing.⁴⁶

Crucially, Lipman-Blumen observes that members of the entourage "are leaders in-training, who act in the leaders name." The entourage is devoted to serving the leader and executing all critical tasks regardless of the members' affinity for the leader. The mission of the entourage is to keep the leader in power; members derive their status and "raison d'être" based on their loyal relationship with the leader.⁴⁷

Toxic leaders are more comfortable with their inner circles, knowing they share interests and goals. Further, the leader can easily identify the entourage members and can count on their loyalty to do whatever is necessary for the cause. Finally, members of the entourage may be called upon for the honorary role of standing in for the leader; no other follower group has this privilege. The outer circle of the entourage acts as a retainer—those subordinates that attend to the personal needs of the leader. Although outside members may have similar aspirations or goals within the organization, they may not be trustworthy. Often retainers working for toxic leaders remain in their positions for other benefits, such as empowerment, status, and respect from other departments that fear their leader's power and control.⁴⁸

It is imperative to underscore that toxic leaders do not act alone; they need a support system of their own to survive, while in the process creating toxic followers of the future. These entourages must be transformed or eradicated at the lowest levels to prevent the spread of organizational toxicity.

Summary

Toxic leaders thrive precisely because they are not alone; they have support from their trusted inner circles. Moreover, these in-group members may be toxic leaders in training. Further, the entourage or disciples represent a powerful alliance that overpowers

46. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 150–51.

47. Lipman-Blumen, 151.

48. Lipman-Blumen, 152–54.

their targeted victims and is shielded by their toxic leaders. Toxic networks will continue their abusive leadership unless higher authority holds these abusers and their inner circles accountable.

The out-groups also have a responsibility to support each other, document, report, and use the formal complaint system to expose these harmful leaders. Additionally, leaders may arm themselves with continual education in the areas of leadership development, personality typology, and emotional intelligence, while establishing a culture of toxic awareness.

A deeper look into the murky networks of toxicity reveals this darker side of leadership whereby abusive leaders are protected by trusted followers or assistants to carry out their deeds. Many innocent workers become victims of toxic manipulation. Unfortunately, the price to stop bullying is paid heavily by the targets themselves. The 2021 *Workplace Bullying Survey* reported that 23 percent of the targeted victims quit their jobs, 17 percent were forced out in what was made to appear as voluntary separation, 12 percent were actually terminated, and 15 percent transferred to another organization. Sadly, the gist of these statistics reveals that the targeted victims of toxic leaders had a 67 percent chance of losing the jobs that they once loved.⁴⁹ The unfortunate victims of toxic leaders may carry the scars of emotional abuse for the rest of their lives; organizations owe it to them to eliminate toxic leaders and disband destructive follower groups.

The sad truth is that humans are imperfect. With this fact comes the good, bad, and sometimes abusive toxic leader. How we choose to eradicate this dark side of leadership must stem from awareness, education, and a lexicon that enables workers at all levels to recognize toxicity. We often wonder how toxic senior leaders develop. It is incumbent upon all of us to stop toxicity at the lowest levels and transform these susceptible followers into viable leaders of tomorrow. ✈️

49. Namie, 21.

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