Organizational Dynamics of Toxic Leading

Obstacles and Key Concepts

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Across academic fields, from leadership studies to organizational psychology, theoretical development of toxic leadership has lagged, curtailing the utility of related empirical studies to military leaders and scholars alike. The study of organizational culture is a tremendous resource for advancing such research, but the relationship between toxic leading and organizational culture is underdeveloped and poorly understood. Studies of toxic leadership in particular often miss many organizational dynamics, focusing on the personal qualities of leaders and unwittingly obscuring the role of an organization's nature and processes. An analysis of limitations in the literature finds that the dimensions of an organization, such as its basic assumptions about reality or its personality, will affect the appearance, shape, and persistence of that organization's experience with toxic leading.

The military is at a crossroads on the topic of military leadership. As such, the study of toxic leading in the military is at a critical juncture. Our military has achieved many great accomplishments in its history, especially when it has steadfastly defended innocent life as in the Berlin Airlift of 1948–49, the Allied liberation of prisoners from the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II, and more recently the US Air Force's 2021 evacuation of 122,000 personnel from Afghanistan over a two-week period. Yet impressions of the world stage in the twenty-first century describe our present time as increasingly complex and dangerous, supposedly demanding more from the United States military than it has provided in the past.

Many voices claim the need for superior military leadership has never been greater. To these voices, the world is uncertain and unstable, and the threats in it are multiplying. At the same time, US military members have long testified to a lack of consistent mentoring across the ranks, suggesting the military is failing to transmit some of its best leadership lessons to its younger leaders. Does this constitute some sort of internal crisis, while externally the global environment is demanding ever more from our ranks?

Related to this query on the possibility of an internal crisis of leadership, the number of US military leaders removed for cause from command and other high-level responsibilities continues to climb. Some of these leaders became accountable for unethical behavior, including leaders who practiced destructive behaviors in the context of their leadership role. Professional military education can help here, with its assortment of

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brick-and-mortar and online courseware on leadership concepts, but it cannot shoulder the entire burden of developing a cadre of skilled, self-aware leaders—those who choose not to descend into unethical or destructive leadership. If the military is indeed failing in its efforts to reduce toxic leading, what knowledge is available outside the military, in academia?

Leadership studies is the most obvious home in academia for answers to a crisis of leadership, other than the study of history itself. Yet this is a field in some disarray. The manner of leadership theory's birth and development constrains its ability to respond to some of the most urgent current questions. A renowned leadership theorist in 2009 freely admitted the limitations of this field's achievements when he wrote "leadership is the most studied and least understood topic of any of the social sciences" and added that "never have so many labored so long to say so little."[1] A more recent leadership study from 2018 described the leadership literature as appearing "unmanageable—an endless supply of questions with very few solid answers." The authors see much scholarly activity in the field as "a scramble to produce new and relevant theories of leadership," and posit that this condition stems from the "chasing of prevailing social currents."[2] Such concerns are only part of the cause of the current state of the discipline of leadership studies.

Leadership Studies: A Short History

Leadership studies, having stood up on wobbly legs only in the twentieth century, developed from the assumptions of other social science disciplines almost as young—especially management studies. Thus, the leadership literature includes the virtues and vices of these other fields. Management studies, for example, developed during the early twentieth century. This field, featuring the work of Frederick Taylor, is rooted in the rising interest in efficiency and motion studies that organized around improving factory production. Management studies refine bureaucratic and hierarchical principles while seeking maximum efficiency, but the discipline's drawback is a disregard for all ends other than the goal of efficiency for the sake of increasing profit.[3]

This limitation has moral and ethical implications, affecting not only leadership studies globally, but also heavily contributing to the direction and limitations of the philosophy of education in the United States.[4] The implications here are that management principles and management studies have curtailed the examination of moral development in leadership and leadership studies. For example, in 2019 a researcher argued that from the early twentieth

1. Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), qtd. in S. Benmira and M. Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory," *BMJ Leader* 5 (2021): 3.

2. Fil Arenas, Daniel Connelly, and Michael Williams, *AU-26 Developing Your Full Range of Leadership: Leveraging a Transformational Approach* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2018), vii.

3. Peter Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice,* 8th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2019), 53; and see also Christopher Toner, "Militia vel Malitia: How Can the Military Contribute to a Just Society?," *Logos* 13 (2010): 125.

4. Raymond Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

century onward, the effect of morally vacuous management principles on US military leadership has been significant and "has also degraded the culture of leadership in the military."[5]

Decades after this early infusion of management culture into the US military's culture, another researcher published an exhaustive study that revealed similar damage from management culture to the moral fiber of the private sector. He surveyed 1,700 business executives, organizing his questionnaire around one underlying query: How ethical are people in business? The data did not, in the researcher's judgment, present a final answer, but the determination of "inconclusive" brought with it a hint of the problem in the business world—there was no sense of a coherent ethics in it.[6]

The words of one of the respondents capture the heart of this disappointing picture. The business executive "exists for only one purpose, to create and deliver value satisfactions at a profit to himself. . . . If what is offered can be sold at a profit (not even necessarily a long-term profit), then it is legitimate." Another respondent summed up the gravity of the problem in his advice to colleagues: if you want to be ethical, "find an ethical boss."[7] The clear implication is that the lack of an ethical boss does not secure some sort of neutral ground morally, but rather indicates a need to quit or accept an inevitable slide into immoral behavior.

Thus, the influence of management studies has been to sidestep the examination of moral implications in the leadership literature, to the point of suggesting leadership is an amoral activity. For that matter, neither are psychology or sociology equipped for such a task. At the turn of the millennium, a scholar of leadership studies described much of the literature as essentially Macchiavellian at heart, meaning it concerned itself with questions of power and its increase absent any clear moral direction.[8]

Given the above ancestry, the field of leadership studies today is inadequate to the urgent task of aiding the comprehension, diagnosis, and remediation of the immoral harms of toxic leading. If leadership is primarily a question of power, as Macchiavellian thinking proposes, then any path that increases power is admissible, including moral and psychological harms that may occur along this path. In fact, within such a power mindset the only moral lapse might be a case in which a leader chooses not to increase their power, which indeed echoes Macchiavelli's own judgment on a foolish or errant prince. In *The Prince,* he makes clear his view that the "virtuous" leader is one who increases his power to achieve his desires. The only moral offense in a leader is to consciously refrain from using or increasing power—for any reason.[9]

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5. Leif Torkelsen, "Errand Boys and Grocery Clerks: The Roots of American Military Professionalism Reconsidered" (paper presentation, Air Command and Staff College Faculty Forum, 2019).

6. Raymond Baumhart, "How Ethical Are Businessmen?," *Harvard Business Review* (Jul–Aug 1961): 6–19, 156–76.

7. Baumhart, 6.

8. Nathan Harter, "Macchiavelli: Father of Leadership Studies" (conference paper presentation, Eric Voegelin Society Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, September 1–2, 2000).

9. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. & trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 47–49.

In order for the literature to catch up on this problem of toxic leading, researchers should seek out clues in organizational dynamics. The study of organizational dynamics provides a critical, untapped resource for the investigation of toxic leading. Specifically regarding the US military, a military service's experience of toxic leading is inseparable from the manner of its founding and early history. Following up on this idea, three basic concepts from the study of organization culture can serve as platforms for research programs: an organization's set of basic assumptions, its method of early survival, and the proposal of a service personality as a researchable construct.

The Nature of Organizations

Some have said of particular military leaders "She's definitely Army!" or "He's all Marine!" This appears as a standard metaphor in the US military, assigning certain service culture-specific properties to someone's thinking and behavior. In the film *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), for example, the character Ensign Willie Keith says of the *Caine*'s new captain, Lieutenant Commander Phillip Queeg, played by Humphrey Bogart, "Well, he's certainly Navy."

It may be that leaders—military or political—tend to reflect the characteristics of the cultures they come from in a variety of ways, at the level of a military service and even at the national level. A renowned historian once famously claimed a country gets the leader it shapes. From Alexander the Great to Winston Churchill, this scholar's work nimbly jumps across cultures and vast stretches of time to arrive at this singular finding—no leader, however startling or disruptive or talented, is an anomaly to the culture that bore them. Leaders are children of their cultural origins.[10]

If this view is right, that a national culture tends to produce leaders that have a common orientation and preferences, then military analyst Carl Builder's thesis in *The Masks of War* should be considered in proposing that military leaders undergo the same process—military service culture shapes its members.

As a RAND analyst in 1985, Builder was asked to investigate why one US military branch was better than another at strategic thinking and planning. His answer formed the entire basis of his book. Builder claims each US military branch exhibits particular behavioral patterns related to three factors—the problem that led to its creation—its origin, the way it prefers to fight, and its primary insecurity.[11] In short, services have unique personalities. Note that what is meant here by the word personality is more than just a term of convenience. From those personalities, the services may even have unique pathologies. These organizational dynamics influence each military branch's experience with toxic leadership. For example, consider the particular core ideas around which the three military services have formed over time—ideas fundamental to their development.

10. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 2.

11. Carl Builder, *Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 8, 17, 127–29.

Air Force

The US Air Force exists as a technology and a platform of operations—specifically "air vehicles."[12] Extrapolating from Builder and others, the Air Force exists as an independent branch to facilitate the fullest expression of a technology, in war and in national defense.[13] Its deepest insecurity is fear of dependence, especially on other military branches, that will prevent the Air Force from doing what it wants. Note that the insecurity or pathology will relate to or stem from the personality, and that different branches will have different pathologies.

Army

According to Builder, the US Army sees itself as above all the nation's servant, and then its keeper or storehouse of the skills of war. Its fighting preference, distinct from the Air Force, is to prove itself worthy in whatever it does in this servant role, to demonstrate its value as an institution.[14] As such, the Army does not value independence above all other priorities like the US Air Force. Its deepest insecurities are its persistent identity crisis—is it infantry, artillery, armor, or what?—and its fear of irrelevance. This concern is especially so in the nuclear weapons age, given that the Navy and Air Force would deliver the bulk of nuclear warheads via Air Force aircraft and land-based silos and Navy submarines.[15]

Navy

The US Navy's identity appears to be a direct function of its sense of its own stature. It sees itself first as the wielder of seapower. Immediately following this idea is the assumption that this is the most important power the United States has. Its fighting preference is to maintain an unrivaled role as the country's first line of defense.[16] Above all else, the Navy values independence as an institution, specifically independence of command. This uniquely Navy perspective seeks to set apart Navy commanders both from non-Navy authorities and from higher echelons within the Navy, treating each commander's own authority in a special, even sacred context.[17] While this imperative descends from the Navy's long history and its traditions, it is just as resonant in today's Navy.[18] As nuclear weapons submarine commander Captain Frank Ramsey, portrayed by Gene Hackman, says in the film *Crimson Tide* (1995), "It may be the commander in chief's navy, but this is my boat!"

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12. Builder, *Masks of War*, 37.
13. US Air Force, *Counterair Operations,* Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-01 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, June 15, 2023), 1–5.
14. Builder, *Masks of War* 33, 86–88.
15. Builder, 185–93.
16. Builder, 32, 74.
17. Builder, 31.
18. US Department of the Navy (DoN), *Naval Warfare,* Naval Doctrine Publication 1 (Washington, DC: DoN, March 2010), 1.

Builder's argument regarding service personalities can illuminate the topic of toxic leadership in the military. Following up his idea that each US military branch has a unique, persistent personality, and a pathology related to this personality, a service's personality and pathology will affect its experience of leadership in general and specific ways. Jean Lipman-Blumen, a leading scholar of toxic leadership, notes, "Our society determines how leaders will come to power and what constitutes good or bad leadership."[19]

One World War II historian writing about a toxic US Army officer observes "anyone who has ever been in the Army knows the type."[20] The practical point of *Masks of War* is that an astute observer can make some determinations about a military branch's patterns of behavior, institutional likes and dislikes, and fears. Builder was most concerned in his book with how a service's personality will shape its strategic thinking and analytical judgments. This leads to two questions: How does a military branch's personality shape the leaders it produces? and, How might a military branch's personality shape the destructive leadership that sometimes occurs within it?

Organizational Pathways and Latency

The claim that an organization's personality or DNA or culture shapes members' behavior is not new. For that matter, neither is toxic leadership. In an influential 2004 history of the Revolutionary War, a description of British General James Grant precisely matches the following comment from a recent toxic leadership article: "[Toxic leaders] can be quite responsive to missions from higher headquarters and obsequious to peers and especially to superiors, but their deficiencies are evident to subordinates."[21] The historian described Grant as such: "His superiors thought well of him, and he was exquisitely sensitive to their wishes. . . . But men who served under him . . . hated and despised him."[22]

Grant's destructive leadership caught up with him in New Jersey, where he commanded British forces. His failures were exceedingly costly to British fortunes in the war, inspiring a colonists' revolt and spreading internal dissension in his own ranks and between British soldiers and Hessian mercenaries.[23] Leading voice on organizational culture Edgar Schein has been arguing for just such an idea—the viral transmission of behaviors across an organization—through five editions of his classic text *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

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19. 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), 72.

20. Stephen A. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 15, qtd. in George Reed, "Toxic Leadership," *Military Review* (July–August 2004), 67.

21. Reed, 68.

22. David Hackett-Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183.

23. Hackett-Fischer, 173–98.

Power of Organizational Pathways

Specifically, Schein insists an organization's culture provides commonly accepted pathways to goal achievement, including the rights and wrongs on how to behave. "We always do it this way." "We never do that." A careful reading of Schein includes an abrupt reality check—this repetition and enforcement of certain patterns of behavior reinforce both good and bad behaviors.

Sometimes a culture will reinforce behaviors damaging to its members and to the organization itself. One of the clearest examples of this in the military is an organization that prides itself on always getting the mission done, while its leaders consistently achieve the mission over the carcasses of those who work for them. This organizational approach that values "short-term metrics" jeopardizes the longer, more enduring mission that includes future mission readiness, unit health and morale, mutual respect between persons, and the common good of the community that the military exists to serve.[24]

What is especially concerning about bad behavior is, just as an organization's pathology relates to its personality, as noted earlier, it may also be the case that an organization's bad behavior often is a distortion or inversion of the positive behaviors related to mission achievement—for example, think of how some units practice hazing as part of an onboarding process. While this bad behavior appears justifiable to some in its perceived relation to mission accomplishment, it usually leads to destructive consequences, and often permits members to simultaneously pursue self-oriented goals that will conflict on some level with the stated mission.

Schein roots the impetus to distort good practices or to distort positive goals and missions in a psychological need to reduce anxiety.[25] Leaders may be trying to solve problems that legitimate organizational pathways cannot effectively address. If the leader believes the normal, approved practices are failing, to reduce the tension from a perception of impending mission failure they may choose to practice the bad behavior.

Latency: How Toxic Leading Hides

The member also may be simultaneously pursuing alternative or "latent" functions or goals, which can be wide-ranging in their amount of distortion from the stated mission and in their amount of negativity, from goals such as organizational preservation all the way to a need to intentionally harm other people.[26] The unfortunate truth here is that the concatenation of good and bad behaviors in an organization tends to derive from the dynamics and structures of the organization itself.

While evil-minded people are still individually morally culpable for the harm they generate, the style and nature of the harm bears some consistency with the nature of the

24. Reed, "Toxic Leadership," 70.
25. Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 22.
26. Schein, 153–55.

organization—the harm flows from or is shaped by features—or pathways—in the organization. Indeed, the worst forms of bad behavior may be those that are insidious, even insulated from detection or elimination specifically because they appear to be aligned with organizational practices or missions.[27] For example, in many military settings, destructive leadership behaviors can masquerade as "tough" because of the real demands, dangers, and sacrifices of military service.

What accounts for this aspect of organizations, that bad behaviors can have an organizational flavor? Schein offers two answers. First, he identifies three levels of organizational culture. On the surface, the culture reflects artifacts—physical symbols of the culture; at a lower level it expresses beliefs, values, and attitudes; and at the third and lowest level, the culture reveals basic underlying assumptions so powerful and at the same time so natural that they steer organizational life in a way that members barely notice.[28] As Schein explains it, "Basic assumptions . . . have become so taken for granted that you find little variation within a social unit. . . . Members will find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable."[29]

Second, Schein highlights two primary problems of any organization: external adaptation and internal integration.[30] Bad behavior within an organization may have an organizational flavor because it may relate to either of these two imperatives, or both.

For example, unit members responsible for filling out reports in a US Air Force flying squadron may misrepresent mission complete rates out of a concern for external adaptation, specifically that their unit will lose recognition and resources to peer squadrons under the same operations group. A toxic leader in this scenario might browbeat subordinates into falsifying such reports by referring to the realities of external adaptation—that accurate reports will cause the squadron to lose its competition with peer units. This raises a question: Does an organization's culture have the capacity to shape a certain type of toxic leadership common to it in any way? Or is every example of toxic leadership in an organization a one-off example—unique, anomalous, even opposite to the culture?

Toxic Leaders and the Appearance of Success

It is certainly the case that toxic leading that seems to fit the culture and the culture's normal operations is hard to detect and even harder to root out. Excuses and rationalizations will proliferate.[31] A related problem is that, as leading experts on workplace toxicity note, most toxic leaders still seek to thrive in their organization, and often succeed in thriving irrespective of their ability to harm their organization.[32] This desire of the toxic leader to

27. See Reed, "Toxic Leadership," 71.
28. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 18.
29. Schein, 21–22.
30. Schein, 6.
31. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 127.
32. See Reed, *Tarnished*, 49; and Reed, "Toxic Leadership," 68.

work with the organization to gain desired benefits indicates these leaders will act in ways that appear responsive to their organization's needs, tendencies, and goals.

This process will create two significant effects: 1) the toxicity will be masked by the appearance that the behavior aligns with the organization; and 2) toxic leaders will carefully attune their behaviors to organizational norms. Taken all in all, there is considerable reason to suspect that organizations may experience some commonality in their toxic leaders, while still allowing for within-organization variability. Perhaps in some cases the toxic leader becomes a magnified version of the organization, exhibiting extreme versions of the best and/or worst in its culture.

In the US military, the toxic leader may actually be hailed by people and entire organizations as one of its poster children. This contradiction needs explaining. According to one researcher, the US military is especially susceptible to this kind of confusion because it tends to value self-assurance and decisiveness, and there is a "fine line" between these qualities and an autocratic or toxic leadership style.[33]

A clear-cut fictional example of the problem is the character of US Marine Colonel Nathan Jessup in the film *A Few Good Men* (1992). Jessup is to all appearances the perfect Marine, destined for even greater things than commanding the Marine Corps division and base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In this he both represents and magnifies in his reputation and behavior one possible essence of the Marine Corps: "Marines take care of their own."[34] A related US Marine Corps personality trait is complete self-sufficiency. In magnifying these essences, Jessup at some point steps over a line—the magnification becomes too extreme, becoming a pathology—and he ends up pushing subordinates into breaking laws and even toward suicide.

The point here is that the magnification of the organizational personality trait of a "perfect" Marine still resembles the organizational culture itself—Jessup and the Marine Corps will clean their own laundry, leading Jessup to seek to restore an image of perfection entirely under his own control, rather than transfer a problem Marine off the base. So, just as knowing the organizing idea of the Marine Corps helps to illuminate Jessup's dysfunction, knowing the organizational culture better informs the analyst on the nature of the toxicity, and how it might be dealt with. For example, a recent insightful article highlights some mechanisms for the manifestation of toxic leading particular to flying units, such as the presence of a rogue aviator.[35]

33. Reed, *Tarnished*, 55.

34. Headquarters, US Marine Corps (USMC), *Marine Corps Operations,* Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 1-0 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, USMC, 2019), 1–5.

35. Joshua Bringhurst and Emma Palombi, "Toxic Senior Military Leaders in the Cockpit," *Air & Space Operations Review* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2023), 83, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

Service Personality and Toxic Leading

As discussed above, a military service's experience of toxic leadership will relate on some level to two factors: 1) its key assumptions, and 2) its method of early survival. Early survival refers to organizational behaviors that enabled the new organization to succeed competitively or to protect itself in infancy from detractors. This period and the prevailing manner of survival is important not only because this is when the organization's DNA forms and replicates, but also because survival anxiety builds resistance to change, increasing the likelihood of certain behaviors persisting long into an organization's history.[36]

These factors, baked into the culture from the beginning, organize a service's personality, including its primal insecurity. Moreover, if Schein is correct, service leaders, including its toxic leaders, think according to these two factors that lead into the way each service prefers to fight according to a strategy it will understand.[37] For these reasons, a service personality is a reasonable and effective research construct for toxic leadership.

Military leaders' cognitive pathways form around the service's key assumptions and method of early survival, and in their behaviors—constructive or destructive—the leaders thus reflect the service's personality and its insecurity. This explanation of a service experience with toxic leading would address multiple problems seen in the current research, including but not limited to these three contributions: 1) improved scholarship on toxic leading, specifically via organizational dynamics; 2) awareness of the impact of what is called here organizational toxic latency; and 3) texture in the understanding of the in- and out-groups that form around the toxic leader. Latency here refers to a process wherein the toxic leader uses skill and charm to present toxic behaviors as mere patterns of accepted, tried, and true patterns of behavior that are common to the organization and how it solves problems. The toxic harm is thus masked by the appearance of conformity to organizational norms.

First and foremost, the argument that a service's toxic leaders dysfunctionally reflect their service's personality offers a distinctive theoretical basis for analyzing toxic leadership beyond the current default approaches, which are based on individual pathology—findings related to the unique history and psychology of the toxic leader.[38] According to one author, the persistent influence of the leadership literature's "Great Man Theory" has narrowed the study of and attention on toxic leading to the leader's personal qualities and actions.[39]

One of the biggest limitations to such a single-minded approach is that the news of the toxic behavior tends to come across as a shock, without concrete elements, such as relevant organizational dynamics subject to study or remedy. Expressions of the shock range from "How could this happen?" to "Where did that come from?" and offer little assistance to organizations wishing to increase their resistance to toxic leading. This

36. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 324–30.
37. Builder, *Masks of War*, 127–29.
38. See Reed, "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux," *Military Review* (November–December 2010): 58–64.
39. Ben Martinez, "US Army, Toxic Followership and the Balance of Responsibility," *Military Review* (July-August 2021): 102

shortsightedness may come from a failure to see or acknowledge the organization's critical role in facilitating toxic leadership, mandating a much closer study of both organizational psychology and organizational culture.

Undoubtedly, the organization itself plays a critical role: the toxic leader provides the motive and the organization the means and opportunity. As one business scholar recently observed, companies must enable the toxic managers within it.[40] Thus, the views and findings of studies on toxic leadership in the US military erroneously and inadequately focus exclusively on the individual leadership element in their analysis and recommendations.[41]

One such study claims that toxic leadership in the military is the direct result of the leader's "leadership style and temperament" and that toxic leaders "tend to be toxic regardless of their environment," while appearing to dismiss the relevance of "setting or conditions."[42] The study's explanation for the high frequency of toxic leading in the military emphasizes the permissiveness of senior leaders.[43]

The author's omission of the role of the organization curtails his scholarship: the findings do not include the benefits of organizational psychology's contribution. As a result, this necessarily limits the primary suggestion for mitigating toxic leading in the military to "confronting and reporting toxic leader behaviors when they occur."[44] This tendency to wait for casualties is inadequate, especially given the potential for latency, which can hide toxic harm for years. Yet, this same tendency is prevalent in many organizations.

For example, Jim Jones led the People's Temple for 23 years before his orchestrated mass suicide took over 900 lives. Many other examples of toxic leading, including multiple, high-profile cases, involve patterns of abuse that go unchecked for decades. While there may be a characteristic pattern in organizations to avoid deeper explanations for prevalent harms, possibly due to bureaucratic fears of change or simply inherent instincts to "keep the machine going," this is not an excuse.

Second, within this theoretical basis that a toxic leader will mimic the service's personality in a distorted way, the ability of a leader to get away with persistent destructive behavior in an organization makes more sense. The toxic leader can sidestep termination and even punishment or detection by operating in the organization's shadow as it were. Furthermore, and as previously noted, the leader can dysfunctionally mimic the organization's preferred and commonly seen leadership approaches—hence the latency. This shadow play engages the human and social psychological tendency referred to earlier to rationalize the harmful behavior through what Lipman-Blumen calls "control myths"—rationalizations that harden into scripts that trap individuals into allowing others to repeatedly harm

40. Lynne McClure, *Risky Business: Managing Violence in the Workplace* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1996), cited in Reed, "Toxic Leadership," 70.

41. Anthony Hinen, "Toxic Leadership in the Military," *University of Florida Muma Business Review* 4, no. 5 (June 2020).

42. Hinen, 72–73.

43. Hinen, 74.

44. Hinen, 65.

them.[45] One falsely explains the damage to oneself as rational or even reasonable or worse—as justified.

Third, including the service's personality in the examination of toxic leading informs the study of the in- and out-groups that inevitably form, beyond merely the distinction between those who partly benefit from and those who only suffer from the toxicity.

In-Groups and Out-Groups

How the in- and out-groups function deserves much more attention in the literature, since subordinates' challenges under a toxic leader are defined and dominated by their group affiliation. The toxic leader's tendency to establish in- and out-groups is common knowledge.[46] What is less discussed or even absent from many studies of toxic leading is the critical role the organization plays in permitting the establishment and maintenance of these groups, and even their formation into a kind of dialectic that exacerbates the damage to persons, the organization, and its mission.

The toxic leader's central role in forming the two groups is not in question here. The leader's use of harm forces an apparently dichotomous choice—do followers cooperate with the harm or suffer or die from it while trying to find some means of escape? A neutral position on the harm does not seem possible, at least in the subordinate's eyes. A researcher describes this predicament of the subordinate as a forced choice between "escape or emulation."[47]

While the spread of harm begins with this leader-driven process, as mentioned earlier in this article, the harm still requires the organization's "assistance" to persist, grow, and bring desired returns on the harm to the toxic leader, reinforcing the truism that toxic leaders require toxic organizations to support their penchant for harm.[48] This is not to say that the organization is corrupt as a whole, but only that it has gaps or fissures in its practices, or misalignments or internal contradictions in its culture. These factors work at cross-purposes that can create the above-mentioned shadow spaces for toxic leaders to practice and hide harm.

As a consequence of this formation and persistence of in- and out-groups in a supportive culture, and as the literature attests but perhaps not emphatically enough, the leader and subordinates are constantly distracted from what is most important—mission, excellence in performance, and one's personal and professional development. All activity increasingly revolves around pleasing, side-stepping around, or risking enraging the toxic leader.

The revolving nature of this activity, how organizational life organizes around the toxic leader instead of the mission, and how the in- and out-groups participate in a constant transaction rather than a mere opposition of forces, is precisely why what is happening here is called a dialectic. The effects of this dialectic are as wide-ranging as they are damaging. Similar to life in a cult or under a political ideology replacing reality and becom-

45. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 127.
46. For example, see Lipman-Blumen, 139-60; and Reed, *Tarnished*, 29–30.
47. Reed, 39.
48. See Reed, "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux," 60.

ing a new false reality, subordinates under the toxic leader and supportive in-group perceive only two choices for themselves: cooperate or die.

The pressure here is immense. Relating to the social aspect of human nature, Lipman-Blumen aptly describes the stakes within this dialectic: "Bolstered by the (in-)group, we become part of something. We gain meaning and worth. Banished from the group, our lives become devoid of sense and value. . . . [Staying within the in-group] is worth sacrificing almost anything."[49]

This predicament is stressful to all. In-group members by no means necessarily feel secure, recognizing that if caught in misbehavior—which the toxic leader defines—it may be a very short trip for them to the out-group. They will likely feel the pressure to demonstrate continual loyalty, usually at the expense of the out-group.

Meanwhile, out-group members experience perpetual social harm up to and often including periods of "social death," with some perceiving no hope for escape, while others, eyeing the in-group, recognize the costs of trying to switch sides may be steep.[50] Costs for joining the in-group may include public humiliation, loss of a moral compass, betrayal of friends and associates, or other "moral inversions"—all for merely a different kind of instability.[51]

What already may be apparent is that, like any ideological movement with its camps for exiled outcasts, the toxic leader and in-group need the out-group for various reasons, thus completing the aptness of the term dialectic for in-/out-group dynamics. The toxic leader and in-group use the out-group as evidence of the costs of exile to perpetuate the practice of harms and maintain control. The division of the workplace into only two camps, complicit followers and targets, perpetuates the damage and even routinizes it. Both camps reinforce it: the sycophants by emulating it and the targets by their silent acquiescence.[52]

The mere existence of only two options is actually part of the harm in that it suppresses so many of the nobler human faculties. Subordinates have no room for humane treatment of each other under these conditions. They have no opportunity to do anything positive outside of what pleases the leader, and every act is reduced to whether or not it supports or appears to contradict the leader. Inside this fearful environment, the leader and the in-group control knowledge and the means of communication, hiding the truth, which breeds confusion, doubt, and mistrust. Everything in life seems less important than whether or not one is a member of the "chosen."

In summary, far from in-/out-groups being merely incidental to toxic leading, their formation is the pathology here. By dividing the workplace into these supporters, or toxic followers, and disfavored targets, the toxic leader thus organizes the basis and motive force of the harm they seek to perpetuate. Everyone is always either spreading or receiving the harm. Not only does the current toxic leadership literature undersell this point, but it has not yet captured the role of organizational dynamics in it.

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49. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 39.
50. Lipman-Blumen, 36–39.
51. Reed, *Tarnished*, 62.
52. Reed, 61.

The harm will subsume the higher needs and higher ends of the organization. Therefore, the toxic leader wishing to perpetuate the status quo will be more successful the more adept they are at creating the appearance that the workplace is still meeting these higher needs and ends, and that they are carefully following organizational norms and policies.

When toxic leaders start to slip up and become more vulnerable to detection and to censure, often that is because the leader or toxic followers have veered more sharply from these accepted practices, and the damage becomes more apparent or tips into a major disaster. In some cases the shadow practices that mimic sound organizational behavior pile up and become too numerous or too disturbing to remain hidden.

Conclusion

In any event, for the US military, no matter how much or how little the distance between healthy and toxic practices, the above examination suggests each military service will inadvertently shape the rules of the toxic dialectic—when present—according to its service personality. For that matter, it is not surprising that a military service would shape the rules of this dialectic, given the findings from Schein and many others on organizational psychology and organizational culture. Thus, scholars and practitioners desiring to advance the understanding of toxic leading in the military need to better understand the organization itself. This will allow them to better diagnosis the cause and process of toxic harms and to derive resolutions, including increased study of organizational psychology and culture, and of key concepts such as latency.

Scholars, with the assistance of practitioners, must merge research on organizations with the study of toxic leading. Key concepts such as organizational personality and the dialectic that forms from the exchange between in- and out-groups have much explanatory power to offer to the investigation of toxic leading. For example, the in-/out-group dialectic creates the conditions for toxic leading to thrive by keeping everyone tied to their role of either spreading or silently receiving harms via survival mechanisms, which subtly undermines accomplishment of the actual mission.

Finally, there is a larger dialectic, this one based on the exchange between the toxic leader and the organization itself—variables that interact in ways that can elude diagnosis and persist undercover, even for years or decades. The research on toxic leadership has come a long way, but work remains, especially when it comes to the military's understanding of the organizational dynamics of toxic leading.

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