

# Defining Toxic Leading for the Air Force

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An examination of current research on toxic leadership, including elements such as negative behavior, hostility, and demoralization, reveals areas requiring further exploration, including a universally accepted definition of toxic leading. Proposing a definition specifically for the Department of the Air Force, this article identifies toxic leaders as those employing negative tactics detrimental to organizational objectives, readiness, climate, and unit morale. The article also encourages expanding the discourse on this topic, principally by examining the intrinsic and under-researched link between organizational culture and toxic leadership.

In the intricate tapestry of organizational dynamics, toxic leadership has emerged as a pervasive and detrimental phenomenon that significantly influences the well-being and productivity of individuals in the workplace. As organizations strive for optimal performance and employee satisfaction, the destructive power of toxic leadership cannot be overstated. An examination of the many dimensions of toxic leadership, utilizing findings from leading experts in the field, creates a picture of its impact, especially in the realm of the profession of arms. Moreover, only an exploration that extends beyond individual leadership behavior fully acknowledges the profound influence of organizational culture on the manifestations and perpetuation of toxic leadership traits.

This article aims to illustrate the intricate interplay between toxic leaders and workplace culture, offering valuable insights for practitioners and organizational and military leaders seeking to foster healthier and more resilient work environments. Leaders must understand the dynamics toxic leading brings to the workplace in order to develop strategies to counter its detrimental effects.

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## **Background**

History provides a background from which to survey leadership. Across the centuries, different types of leaders have shaped the path of world history, for example, Augustus Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Abraham Lincoln. Good or bad, historical figures have delivered valuable insights into how to lead and how not to lead. Similarly, countless authors from Sun Tzu in the sixth century BCE to contemporary leadership researchers such as Steven Covey and Simon Sinek have provided thoughts on what it means to be a “good” leader.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it was not until 1990 that researchers applied leadership theory to explore the negative aspects of leadership, analyzing their adverse effects. In his analysis of the “dark side” of leadership, Jay Conger pointed to several elements to monitor for potential harm to an organization and its people: a leader’s exaggerated behavior, manipulative communication, and autocratic management style.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, he contended, the positive outcomes a leader brings to an organization are far overshadowed by the negative consequences of their behavior. Additionally, Conger detailed leadership attributes that could contribute to a harmful working environment.

In 1996, political scientist Marcia Lynn Whicker first employed the term toxic leadership to label damaging leadership behavior that personally targets and harms employees. In her seminal study, she identified three leadership types: trustworthy, transitional, and purely toxic leaders.<sup>3</sup> She described toxic leaders as exhibiting certain traits such as selfishness and malicious intent and focused largely on ameliorating the effects of such leadership.

## **Toxic Leading: Concept and Characterizations**

In the three decades since the introduction of the term, the concept of toxic leadership has been more rigorously researched and analyzed. Although it has been heavily discussed and debated, a meta-analysis reveals a need for a more consistent and coherent definition of this provocative leadership theory.

From a practical perspective, there needs to be a shared understanding of toxic leadership. An argument can be made that leaders and followers desire a more robust and concrete standard against which to evaluate leaders for accountability purposes. The lack of a cohesive definition and understanding of toxic leadership enables toxic leaders to escape responsibility for their damage to the organization and its members. The following analysis of the current definitions for toxic leadership provides a foundation for a concise

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1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Chichester, UK: Capstone Publishing, 2010); and see, for example, Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2008); and Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

2. Jay A. Conger, “The Dark Side of Leadership,” *Organizational Dynamics* 19, no. 2 (1990).

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

and impactful definition for this concept that has universal application within academia and the US Armed Forces, specifically the US Air Force.

As with Whicker's analysis, subsequent definitions of toxic leading have centered on its impact to the individual and organization and the ways to resolve the negative outcomes more than specific, measurable markers of a toxic leader. In this sense, the scholarship offers helpful insights into the way toxic leaders may operate within an organization but tends to lack practical information that would enable organizations and individuals to identify toxic leading in the first place.

One such early attempt at defining toxic leading was offered by former active-duty Army officer and leadership scholar Karen Wilson-Starks. In presenting a framework to analyze toxic leading, she proposed this definition:

It is a leadership approach that harms people—and, eventually, the company as well—through the poisoning of enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy, and innovative expression. Toxic leaders disseminate their poison through over-control. They define leadership as being in control.<sup>4</sup>

The leader's objective is to seek control and therefore exert influence within the organization. In her analysis, a toxic leader is viewed as dispensing a type of professional or figurative "poison" detrimental to an organization and its members.

Additionally, the leader's negative attributes hinder their subordinates' ability to contribute to the greater organization by quashing their individuality, creativity, and motivation. According to this definition, toxic leaders view leadership, at its core, as a function of control, particularly the ability of an individual to wield power over an organization or group. Control in this sense is viewed in a negative light. Yet an argument can be made that successful leaders can maintain control in a way that does not harm the organization nor stifle a subordinate's autonomy and that can still lead to organizational success.

Although a number of other scholars present compelling discussions on toxic leadership, Jean Lipman-Blumen and George E. Reed are considered the leading researchers on this topic, approaching it with their own unique perspectives. Lipman-Blumen's follower-focused theory provides a road map to identify how individuals contribute to creating toxic leaders, how to break from the pull towards toxicity, and how to build the leader within oneself. Her analysis of the follower is rooted in political and corporate examples.<sup>5</sup>

Lipman-Blumen asserts that toxic leaders' personalities are the reason for the enduring harm suffered by their followers. She defines toxic leadership as a "process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and or dysfunctional personal characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers alike."<sup>6</sup> Toxic leaders adversely impact those closest to them and curiously, individuals

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4. Karen Y. Wilson-Starks, "Toxic Leadership," *Transleadership*, 2003, 1–4, <https://transleadership.com/>.

5. Jean Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership: A Conceptual Framework," in *Handbook of Top Management Teams*, ed. Frank Bournois et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org/>.

6. Lipman-Blumen, 214–20.

outside of their influence. Lipman-Blumen develops a strong higher-level definition; however, it is too broad for practical application in the workplace. As a primer, her definition is beneficial, but it needs to enable higher-level leaders the means to measure their subordinates' organizational impact, such as appraisals.

Reed's work, focused on toxic leading in the military, stands out by providing practical, simple methods to overcome toxic leaders that are applicable across organizations.<sup>7</sup> His approach goes beyond the theoretical notions of leadership and uses military-based vignettes to highlight the impact of toxic leaders. Reed defines a toxic leader as "one whose demotivational behavior negatively impacts morale and climate."<sup>8</sup> Reed thus demonstrates how toxicity at senior levels erodes healthy workplace environments, leading to the departure of talent, and in extreme situations, to tragedy.<sup>9</sup>

Still, as such an analysis demonstrates, the field of leadership studies has yet to truly identify a toxic leader's common attributes or a working definition of toxic leadership for practical application. The difficulty in capturing such a definition is perhaps best explained by Lipman-Blumen, who notes that "defining toxic leaders can prove vexing, at best, since one individual's toxic leader is another's heroic savior, given that context, history, and perspective weigh heavily in such judgments."<sup>10</sup> In other words, toxic leading is subjectively defined, both by the perceptions of others and by the sociocultural and historical contexts in which it operates.

The Department of Defense also lacks a current coherent definition of toxic leadership. In 2017, the US Army was the first service within the Department to create a working definition for toxic leadership. The 2017 Army Regulation (AR) 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, noted that a toxic leader—distinct from other "destructive leaders" including "incompetent managers" and "criminals"—is a "toxic self-centered abuser." It explained further:

These leaders are also usually bright and energetic, as well as goal-oriented and boss-focused. Capable of producing spectacular short term results but are arrogant, abusive, intemperate, distrusting, and irascible. They are typically distrusting micro-managers, never burdened by introspection.<sup>11</sup>

The Army updated this definition in 2019 under the umbrella term of counterproductive leadership.<sup>12</sup> For such leadership to be considered toxic, "counterproductive behaviors

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

8. Reed.

9. Reed, 35.

10. Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership."

11. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, Army Regulation 600-100 (Washington, DC: HQDA, April 5, 2017), <https://armypubs.army.mil/>.

12. HQDA, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 31, 2019), <https://armypubs.army.mil/>.

must be recurrent and have a deleterious impact on the organization's performance or the welfare of subordinates."<sup>13</sup>

While the other military branches grappled with the issues surrounding toxic leaders, the US Army led the way, defining such adverse leading and thus giving all tiers of its leadership the ability to understand this concept and ultimately hold those guilty of this behavior accountable. This article does not suggest that the other services are not holding those who create a toxic environment accountable; instead, it highlights the Army was the only service to officially define and address this concept within its regulations.

As opposed to the aforementioned academic explanations of toxic leadership, the 2017 US Army definition focused on identifying a toxic leader as it relates to their attributes. Yet to that end, this definition—as well as the Army's current one—does not create a mutually exclusive framework that distinguishes between a bad leader and a toxic leader. A leader can be intelligent, energetic, and boss-focused, and produce measurable results, and the same leader might also be arrogant, intemperate, and distrusted in the eyes of their subordinates. Such a leader might still not be considered toxic.

Indeed, rather than offering definitive answers, the Army definition raises further questions. Are all the stated characteristics of a toxic leader needed to make them toxic? Is the list exhaustive? Moreover, how exactly the Army definition relates to the toxic leader's impact on the greater organization and individual members remains unclear. How does one measure a leader's deleterious impact?

## **The Role of Followers**

While much of the literature on toxic leadership includes a particular focus on the individual, some scholars have examined how followers' behavior affects toxic leadership. Perhaps reflecting this, the Army regulation does state that the subordinate is responsible for examining "his or her own behavior . . . to prevent or remedy counterproductive leadership."<sup>14</sup>

In line with her focus on followers, misplaced confidence in a leader is a cornerstone of Lipman-Blumen's work. She provides commentary against a backdrop of historical and corporate vignettes on why followers sometimes tolerate and emulate toxic leaders. Lipman-Blumen speaks to the human need for leaders, how followers create toxic leaders, and solutions to break out from the enabling environment that breeds toxic leaders.

Fear and uncertainty underpin the human desire for leaders. In part, seeking a leader who provides security and authority contributes to the development of an environment ripe for toxicity when coupled with the belief "that leaders know best, and followers should simply put themselves in their hands."<sup>15</sup> Lipman-Blumen also finds followers unconsciously

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13. HQDA, *Army Profession*, 8.

14. James W. Shufelt Jr. and Clinton O. Longenecker, "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses," *Military Review*, November 2017, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>.

15. Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership," 78.

look for ways to increase and improve their self-esteem. Despite their toxicity, leaders who offer approval and validation fill the void created by low self-esteem.

The experience of working for a toxic leader presents differently for every person. Yet Lipman-Blumen and Reed posit similar reasons why individuals choose to stay in a toxic environment. In their works, both authors discuss how individuals want a sense of belonging. Lipman-Blumen validates this point with her discussion on humans' search for security. In this process, people often build up toxic leaders to be godlike figures, manifesting in the idea that they, as followers, are part of the chosen. Being a part of the elite group such as a US Air Force squadron gives an individual "reassurance that [they] live in a meaningful and orderly world in which [they] play a significant role."<sup>16</sup> This elevation in status enables toxic leaders to exploit subordinates. Followers, in turn, endure more improprieties and misconduct by their leadership than they should since they feel at the center of essential affairs.

For Reed, an individual ascertains their tolerance for workplace toxicity on the motivation to seek membership in one group over another—his 4-F Theory of Affiliations: Funds, Fun, Fellowship, and Feelings.<sup>17</sup> Individuals seek affiliation based on monetary compensation from group membership as well as the enjoyment, social bonding, and the sense of being a part of something bigger than the self. This theory directly applies to why individuals join the military and if they ultimately retire from the military. Importantly, the military provides connection in the form of comradery.

As mentioned above, Reed contends that toxic leading often results in adverse consequences for the organization as a whole—at the minimum, it leads to the loss of talent and, in worst cases, it leads to tragic consequences, including death.<sup>18</sup> Before exiting a toxic situation, however, employees accept the behavior in question. In addition, Reed speculates that the military's very nature leads to higher toxicity tolerance. This tolerance is predicated on respect for the rank structure and chain of command and not necessarily respect for the toxic individual. Often in the military, a lower-ranking individual feels they do not have recourse to confront or elevate complaints about the misbehavior.<sup>19</sup>

This phenomenon is not uncommon, especially given the results-driven military environment. Individuals are rewarded for the operational and tactical outcomes they bring to the organization despite their behavior or how the outcome was derived. Supervisors of the toxic individual often do not see the questionable behavior, only the mission results.

Both scholars' commentaries on organizational culture and toxicity provide a foundational understanding of the correlation between the two; however, this topic warrants deeper exploration. Examining how an organization's culture contributes to toxic leadership is critical in understanding this destructive yet somewhat elusive phenomenon.

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16. Lipman-Blumen, 52.

17. Reed, *Tarnished*, 30–33.

18. See, for example, Joshua Bringhurst and Emma Palombi, "Toxic Senior Military Leaders in the Cockpit," *Air & Space Operations Review* 2, no. 2 (2023), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

19. Reed, *Tarnished*, 30.

## The Role of Organizational Culture

As Lipman-Blumen and Reed have speculated, organizational culture contributes to toxic leaders. Lipman-Blumen supposes culture contributes to how leaders are identified and ultimately selected within an organization.<sup>20</sup> The standards and guidelines of an organization establish the criteria for the selection of leaders. At times, the acceptable norms are such that a toxic leader will thrive. Reed cites military-related experiences to relay the shared values and beliefs held in the military, which may cultivate an environment suited to breed toxic leaders.<sup>21</sup> Their perspectives on the motivations behind leadership and followership provide the foundation by which an understanding on toxic leading's relationship to organizational culture can be built.

Although Edgar Schein, a founding father in the field of organizational psychology, was not writing specifically about toxic leadership, his work offers a spotlight on the less obvious influence of organizational culture on behavior. This framework helps in understanding the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational culture.

As Schein indicates, organizations are created to solve problems.<sup>22</sup> Yet how an organization is structured often creates an inherent dysfunction in which toxic leaders can emerge. Organizational dysfunction exists within the gaps among Schein's three levels of culture: artifacts—visible evidence of company culture, such as a dress code or a logo—and behaviors, espoused values, and basic assumptions. Toxic leaders exploit these gaps under the guise of prioritizing manifest functions at the expense of latent functions. Reducing organizational anxiety to be consistent with organizational identity and cultural DNA is another apparatus that creates seams along Schein's three levels of culture that toxic leaders can exploit.<sup>23</sup> Toxic leaders emerge from and thrive within an organization's response mechanism to the problem it was created to solve.

For example, if the Air Force is trying to solve the problem of how it can win a war independently, it must develop processes that lead the organization toward its objectives. Developing, refining, and pursuing these processes offers an opportunity to perceive historical events, sometimes unknowingly, through a lens of confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance, reinforcing the necessity of finding a solution. Reinterpreting past events to identify lessons for future endeavors combines with an idealization that a service must execute its functions with absolute perfection and precision.

The marriage of these two elements creates a culture that demands "excellence in all we do."<sup>24</sup> This demand for continuous excellence can manifest into an organizational pathol-

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20. Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership," 85.

21. Reed, *Tarnished*, 54.

22. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 8.

23. Schein, 17–27.

24. Charles Q. Brown Jr., *A Profession of Arms: Our Core Values* [Blue Book] (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, May 2022).

ogy that focuses solely on the problem-solving results that serve the organization's purpose without considering how these solutions were derived.

The lack of inquiry into the actions taken to achieve solutions for organizational problems creates an opportunity for toxic leaders to thrive under the erroneous justification that their efforts and mistreatment of subordinates are purely in the best interests of organizational success. As Schein indicates, every organization has two challenges: solving the problem with which it was tasked and organizing internally to solve this problem.<sup>25</sup>

In response to these challenges, an organization creates response mechanisms, developing an organizational culture that supports its structure. Military services tend to prioritize solutions to problems without significant inquiry into how these results were achieved. Schein suggests that when the results are congruent with the espoused beliefs and values of the organization, how the results were produced tends to be overlooked.<sup>26</sup>

An organizational culture suffering from results-oriented myopia enables toxic leaders to embrace toxic behavior as a means to achieving organizational objectives. Because the desired results are achieved, the toxic leader is rewarded with praise and recognition from their superiors, which translate into validation of the toxic leader's behavior to continue. In other words, the organization tolerates toxic but productive employees.<sup>27</sup> This tolerance, under the caveat of productivity, seeps into organizational culture, creating a dysfunction that is difficult to correct.

A toxic leader thrives in this dysfunction by demonstrating superior performance consistent with the organization's characteristics.<sup>28</sup> This organizational dysfunction manifests itself in performance measurement and organizational identity. An example of performance measurement dysfunction becomes apparent by applying Schein's three levels of culture to the Air Force award system. As mentioned above, one of the Air Force's primary espoused beliefs is teamwork, yet awards are written for the individual to recognize individual accomplishments.

Schein finds this contradiction is common in organizations; however, the risk is these opportunities become available for toxic leaders to exploit because of the misalignment among the three levels of culture.<sup>29</sup> The result is a toxic personality that appears to be an effective leader who takes credit for team accomplishments through the reward system and maintains narratives consistent with organizational identity. Furthermore, recommendations to correct this dysfunction often appear inconsistent with an organization's identity and are thus ignored and interpreted as a threat to the organization's survival.

Every organization has a survival problem that is addressed through manifest and latent functions.<sup>30</sup> As Schein argues, manifest functions are the main mission of an organization.

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25. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 6.

26. Schein, 26.

27. Reed, *Tarnished*, 49.

28. Reed, 48–51.

29. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 17–18.

30. Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 60–69.



For example, the Air Force is manifestly projecting combat airpower globally. Latent functions are “taken for granted and not publicly spoken of.”<sup>31</sup> An example of a latent function of the service is the psychological welfare of its members. Returning to the idea of over-focusing on mission accomplishment (manifest function) at the expense of the psychological welfare of members (latent function), it is apparent how a cultural dysfunction begins to form. Feeding this growth are the efforts centered on neutralizing threats to an organization’s identity.

Organizational threats refer to anything that challenges the organization’s brand identity, thus requiring a response to mitigate these threats.<sup>32</sup> For example, the land component has a stereotypical personality associated with its identity, and personalities that stray from the stereotype are often at odds with the service’s culture. The organizational response to these errant personalities is to “get with the program.” Senior leaders desire and reward efforts that support the organization’s survival (mission accomplishment and neutralizing threats to identity); little attention is paid to how these efforts are conducted.

The importance of organizational identity and survival is explained by Schein’s concept of anxiety reduction, which compels us to desire and subsequently develop a more stable and predictable view of how things are and how they ought to be.<sup>33</sup> Elements such as service members and external events that challenge an organizational culture’s status quo are interpreted as threats. Thus, employees who act consistently with organizational culture to mitigate these threats are typically rewarded for their behavior, regardless of its potential impact on coworkers and subordinates. The status quo preference stems from what Schein calls the cultural DNA of the organization.<sup>34</sup>

Cultural DNA is the idea that the core beliefs, values, and behaviors that make a group successful in its early phases of existence become embedded in the organization’s culture and become basic underlying assumptions.<sup>35</sup> This notion explains why organizational culture is tied to an organization’s survival; what made it successful in the past must be repeated for the organization to continue to survive. This perception is similar to the “we’ve always done it this way” mindset. Over time, this way of thinking becomes cemented into the cultural bedrock of the organization. Any cultural changes inconsistent with its existing culture are viewed as threats and thwarted.

Lipman-Blumen highlights a further complexity in the relationship between toxic leadership and culture: she suggests that simply complying with organizational culture creates opportunities for toxic leaders to emerge.<sup>36</sup> Participating in and complying with the culture validates cultural norms and values even if the leader or follower is nontoxic. For example, upholding the core value of “excellence in all we do,” competing for awards,

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31. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 153.

32. Schein, 154–55.

33. Schein, 10–11.

34. Schein, 7.

35. Schein, 7.

36. Lipman-Blumen, “Toxic Leadership.”

and mitigating threats to the culture validate the culture's existence, especially when most of the leaders are nontoxic. This thought is not to suggest that members within an organization must be subjected to toxic leadership, but rather to recognize how organizational culture creates opportunities for toxicity.

How an organization responds to the problems for which it was created plays a significant role in developing its leaders. Demanding excellence in solving problems creates opportunities for toxic leaders to thrive by blurring the lines between serving the mission and being exceptionally tough or even toxic to subordinates. Forming a dysfunctional culture into a dysfunctional problem, seeking anxiety reduction, and prioritizing manifest functions over latent functions are all variables that contribute to a destructive organizational culture. Changing cultural DNA may not be feasible, so a more tactical solution is to address toxic leadership when it is encountered. Indeed, toxic leadership is commonplace where it is tolerated.<sup>37</sup>

Organizational culture as the product of an organization's structure in response to a problem set offers opportunities for toxic leaders to emerge and thrive. The culture within an organization is not confirmation that toxicity exists or that the organization is flawed, only that consideration should be applied to the relationship between organizational culture and how it may support toxic leadership. Analyzing toxic leadership, including organizational culture, offers a complete understanding of why and how toxic leaders continue to develop and persist.

## **A Toxic Leadership Definition for the Air Force**

Considering the limitations in past attempts by academia and the military to define toxic leadership, and the complexity of factors involved in toxic leadership situations, how can the US Air Force move forward to define and address the issue of toxic leaders within its own ranks? Combating toxic leading in the Air Force begins with creating an Air Force-specific definition of toxic leadership. Such a definition will not only help identify toxic leaders and hold them accountable but also determine if there are service-specific conditions and an organizational culture that cultivate an environment ripe for toxic leadership.

In defining toxic leading, it is important to note that toxic leadership is not reflected in a single attribute but rather in a combination of attributes tolerated relative to a particular environment. Arguably, in the case of certain traits labeled toxic by the literature, what may make someone toxic in an office environment could make them effective in a combat zone.

This is not to say there are not toxic leaders in combat, but high-stakes, high-stress jobs can create an environment where some common attributes to toxic leadership are acceptable and/or tolerated. As Lipman-Blumen suggests, perceptions along with context and history must be considered altogether. Ultimately, however, a foundational issue of a toxic

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37. Reed, *Tarnished*, 49.

environment is the cost that toxic leadership imposes relative to the benefit the toxic behavior may have on the subordinate's ability to accomplish the mission.

To address these conceptual challenges, this article offers a coherent and concrete definition of toxic leadership for the Air Force. Such a definition demonstrates how toxic leadership runs counter to the Air Force core values of integrity, service before self, and excellence:

A toxic leader is an individual who utilizes negative, hostile, or destructive techniques or tactics that systematically degrade Air Force organizational objectives, readiness, climate, and/or unit morale. Toxic leaders display a host of counterproductive management and motivation styles; examples include and are not limited to fear, ridicule, belittling, bullying, and/or misplaced or unwelcome sarcasm.

Dissecting this definition and addressing all its elements are essential to understanding this leadership style with respect to the Air Force.

### ***Negative Behavior***

Negative or “bad” behavior in relation to leadership has generally been defined as any behavior that leads to harm in others, whether physical or emotional.<sup>38</sup> Individuals or leaders who exhibit negative behavior within the workplace display “hostility, aggressiveness, narcissism, lack of accountability or responsibility, rudeness, disrespect, [and] bullying toward colleagues or clients.”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, these leaders will make “actions or statements that undermine team motivation or business goals, as well as display resistance to change or criticism.”<sup>40</sup> As one study further reveals, such negative behaviors need not be overt or aggressive to be considered harmful; for example, “showing a lack of care for followers” can be harmful as well.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Hostility***

While this concept may seem intuitive or simply one in the list of negative behaviors, it is still worth exploring. In line with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's policy on harassment in the workplace, one author notes a hostile work environment “is a workplace that makes employees feel ‘uncomfortable, scared, or intimidated’ due to

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38. See, for example, Harvey Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), x–xi, 6–9; Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: How It Happens, What It Means, Why It Matters* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2004), 15–21; and Reed, *Tarnished*, 6–15.

39. “How to Deal with Negative Behavior in the Workplace,” USC Annenberg, *Master of Communication Online* (blog), November 15, 2023, <https://communicationmgmt.usc.edu/>.

40. “Negative Behavior.”

41. Juliana Guedes Almeida et al., “Harmful Leader Behaviors: Toward an Increased Understanding of How Different Forms of Unethical Leader Behavior Can Harm Subordinates,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 180, no. 1 (2022), <https://link.springer.com/>.

unwelcome conduct.”<sup>42</sup> Another study notes that hostile environments exist when “any employee becomes the target of disrespectful behavior by more organizationally powerful others.”<sup>43</sup> Toxic leaders thus create an environment that is negative at best and openly hostile at worst. In this sense, they work against Air Force guidelines to serve with dignity and to respect the self, others, and the organization.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Destructive Leadership Behavior***

Lipman-Blumen defines the destructive behavior of toxic leaders as “undermining, demeaning, seducing, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, disenfranchising, incapacitating, imprisoning, torturing, terrorizing, or killing.”<sup>45</sup> Another researcher argues these leaders’ behavior “undermines or destroys the effectiveness of a team.”<sup>46</sup> He also asserts effective leaders build up a team and its dynamics, which leads to success within the organization. Conversely, destructive leaders tear down the group through “bullying, harassing, exploiting, lying, betraying, manipulating—in short, denying subordinates their basic humanity.”<sup>47</sup> These leaders create catastrophic damage to both those they lead and the goals of the overall unit.

### ***Degradation***

In various academic literature and definitions, degrading behavior toward a subordinate is often a cornerstone of how others see toxic leading.<sup>48</sup> To that end, based on *Merriam-Webster’s* definition, degrading actions are those “intended to make a person or thing seem of little importance or value.”<sup>49</sup> When a toxic leader degrades a follower, they choose not to place value on the individual. In short, degrading behavior is a deliberate attempt to belittle, distort, or undermine an individual’s confidence within the toxic leader’s chain of command. Such behavior runs counter to the idea of teamwork that is integral to the Air Force core value of excellence, “to challenge and motivate each other to perform their best.”<sup>50</sup>

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42. “Harassment,” US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (website), n.d., accessed January 10, 2024, <https://www.eeoc.gov/>; and Nikoletta Bika, “Horrible Workplaces: The Signs of a Hostile Work Environment and What to Do about It,” Resources for Employers, September 2023, <https://resources.workable.com/>.

43. Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses*, 9.

44. Brown, *Blue Book*, 10.

45. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

46. Robert Hogan, “How to Define Destructive Leadership,” Hart: Unlocking Leadership (website), September 7, 2012, <https://www.hartconsulting.eu/>; and see also Robert Hogan and Joyce Hogan, “Assessing Leadership: A View from the Dark Side,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 9, no. 1/2 (2001), <https://doi.org/>.

47. Hogan.

48. Gillian Flynn, “Stop Toxic Managers before They Stop You,” *Workforce* 78, no. 8 (August 1999), <https://workforce.com/>; and Wilson-Starks, “Toxic Leadership.”

49. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “degrading,” accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

50. Brown, *Blue Book*, 11.

## **Organizational Failure**

The final aspect of this analysis is found in a toxic leader's ability to hamper an organization's overall objectives, readiness, climate, and/or unit morale. A toxic leader hinders the organization's overall goals through action or inaction.<sup>51</sup> In the end, the higher-level leader may see some success, but it is limited and at the greater expense of other areas within the unit. In the end, subordinates perform at peak survival versus peak performance.

With a working definition in place, organizations, such as the US Air Force, and individuals can not only identify a toxic leader but they can also begin to understand the complex dynamics between the individual toxic leader and the organization. The perpetuation of toxic leading can thus be mitigated at individual and organizational levels.

## **Conclusion**

Toxic leadership is a difficult problem, and it is unlikely the Air Force will ever completely eliminate it. To better combat this form of detrimental leadership, action must be taken sooner rather than later. Toxic leadership, which emphasizes the negative and harmful impact of leadership on the subordinate, continues to have a deleterious effect on both the civilian world and the military.

Examining the body of work on toxic leadership reveals the necessity for deeper exploration, including the need for a relevant working definition for the Air Force. Left unaddressed, this lack of a widely accepted definition will impede efforts to organize a coherent strategy for combating toxic leading in the service. Moreover, failure to establish a clear, doctrinal definition will add to the casualty count while perpetrators and units use various devices and rationalizations for explaining away the damage as anything other than toxic leadership.

The definition offered in this article serves as a starting point for the US Air Force to effectively address this issue by identifying the traits of a toxic leader as well as their impact on its members and the organization as a whole. While the US Army has made strides to capture the essence of toxic leadership, the Air Force as well as the other military services need to do more regarding research, analysis, and overall qualification of the concept for the everyday service member. If toxic leadership is ever to be properly addressed, leaders at every echelon would benefit from speaking about this problem in a similar language.

Furthermore, this analysis engages multiple research paths to offer invaluable insights into the multifaceted nature of toxic leadership. A principal takeaway emerges from understanding the linkage between toxic leadership and organizational culture. Organizational culture significantly shapes the emergence and persistence of toxic leaders. Schein's research delves into the inherent dysfunction within organizational structures that toxic leaders exploit, extending its purview to encompass performance measurement, organizational identity, manifest and latent functions, threats to identity, cultural DNA, compliance, and

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51. Wilson-Starks, "Toxic Leadership."

variables shaping culture. The organizational culture of the Air Force must be considered when studying and ameliorating service-specific instances of toxic leadership.

The integration of insights from contemporary scholars and military-focused authors enriches the discourse, providing a holistic understanding of toxic leadership. The emphasis on addressing toxic leading in the broader context of organizational culture issues a compelling call for refined approaches and effective mitigation strategies. Readers are encouraged to contemplate the nature of toxic leadership, reflecting on the interplay of individual behaviors within the larger organizational framework and their own personal toxic experiences. Recognizing the imperative for comprehensive strategies beyond immediate corrective measures, the research prompts followers and leaders alike to advocate for healthier organizational cultures, thereby mitigating the risks associated with toxic leaders. ➔✳

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