Toxic Leadership over the Years – A Review

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Abstract

Over the past decade the 'dark side of leadership' has gained significant attention among researchers of various backgrounds. Exploring this 'dark side', Toxic leadership is identified as one of the most grave phenomenon that seen as an emerging and costly occurrence in organizations today. Toxicity in leaders is an underlined reality within organizations. The attitude and behaviour of the toxic leaders influence the mind of the subordinates. Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centred attitudes, motivations, and behaviours that have negative effects on subordinates and the organization. Toxic or destructive leadership can lead to serious problems for the workplace, employees, team and organisations. So it becomes the need of the day for individuals and organizations to set up a defence mechanism to counter the spread of toxicity. A non-empirical method was employed for the purpose of this study. A literature approach was used to define Toxic Leadership and Toxic Leader and to demonstrate the different behaviours and qualities of a Toxic Leader and the impact of this leader on followers and organization. Based on the previous studies, this paper has also given means to counter the toxic leaders.

Introduction

Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centred attitudes, motivations, and behaviours that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. Such leadership has no concern for subordinates and the organization and leads to negative effects.

The phrase toxic leader was coined by Whicker(1996), and is linked with a number of dysfunctional leadership styles. Other names include the little Hitler, manager from hell, the toxic boss and boss from hell. Their leadership style is both self-destructive and ultimately corporately harmful as they subvert and destroy organizational structures.

Toxic leadership is a silent killer. Like a venomous snake, toxic leaders drain energy out of an organization. They drain competent workers and discourage competent workers who are creative and energetic. They create a demoralizing, dehumanizing and fearful atmosphere that paralysis the organization.

Toxicity in the workplace comes from toxins within the organization which renders it as a toxic organization. This observation has led to the use of terms such as toxic leader, toxic manager, and toxic culture, which are currently appearing with increasing frequency in business, leadership, management and psychology literature to describe the toxins that create these toxic organizations (Reed, 2004)

Defining Toxic Leadership

Defining toxic leader is the first priority before addressing its impact, cause and solution.

Ulmer Jr. (2012) has defined toxic as poisonous, not far from destructive or harmful. Walton (2007) defined Toxic leadership as behaviour which is exploitive, abusive, destructive, psychological and perhaps legalistically corrupt and poisonous.

Reed (2004) defined Toxic Leadership as an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates. It is a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate.

Analyst Flynn (1999) has provided a descriptive

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definition of a toxic manager and says that he is the manager who bullies, threatens, yells. The manager whose mood swings determines the climate of the office on any given workday.

According to Padilla et al. (2007),toxic leadership is antithetical to good order and discipline and that the characteristics or traits displayed by toxic leaders result in serious negative effects for their employees.

Wilson-Starks (2003) defined it as 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.

It is clear from the above definitions that, though, the usages of words are different from different researchers but the core point that they have tried to drive through is same.

Behaviours and Qualities of Toxic Leaders

Seeger et al. (2005) identified that toxic leaders excel in fighting and controlling rather than elevating followers. They are destructive leaders whose focus is on visible short-term accomplishments. They succeed in their goal and climb up the ladder by pulling down others. They don't have any rationale in decision making.

Lubit (2004) has further enlightened on the destructive nature of toxic. He argued that a central personality trait of many toxic managers is destructive narcissism. In other words, toxic leaders do carry with them traits akin to grandiose, narcissistic, ruthless bullies. Leaders who are toxic corrupt and damage the interests and welfare of the stakeholders.

Toxic leaders exhibit deviant workplace behaviour consisting of voluntary actions that violate established norms and which have a adverse effect on either or both an organization and its members. The followers are not motivated to follow norms

and are compelled to break them voluntarily (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Langton and Robbins (2007) described that a situation becomes more toxic only when the smooth functioning of the organization is disturbed continuously.

Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) depicted aggression, abusive behaviors, egotism, greed, selfishness, and lack of integrity as behaviors' of toxic leaders. Toxic leadership behaviors fall on a continuum ranging from insignificant gestures to physical harassment, and from petty pilfering to fraud and unfair and misrepresentation of facts against the organization. Toxic leaders are not interested in mentoring and developing subordinates. They enjoy controlling using their power and are seen insulting and abusing others.

An important way to look at toxicity in an organization is to look at the impact of such leadership on the culture of the organization. All these behaviors and characteristics of toxic leaders result in a culture which is ambiguous and results in stressful employees.

Y Scouts, an executive search firm, which helps non-profit and social enterprises find exceptional leaders has provided some qualities of toxic leaders. The qualities listed by them are arrogant, autocratic, irritable, maladjusted, lack of confidence, incompetent, hierarchical, unrealistic expectations, symbols of personal authority and discriminatory. The qualities of a toxic leader are completely different from the qualities of a good leader.

Lipman-Blumen (2005) has also enlisted few qualities of toxic leaders. The list includes lack of integrity, in stable ambition, ego, arrogance, amorality, reckless attitude and cowardice.

Consequences of Toxic leadership

Webster (2011) described a number of negative consequences for organisations, including unwanted turnover, reduced employee satisfaction and commitment and increased employee

psychological distress (Mackie 2008; Tepper, 2000). A range of negative impacts as a result of the dark side of leadership have been described, particularly at the individual employee level (Fowlie & Wood, 2009; Kellerman 2004; Sutton, 2007) and includes psychological distress, i.e. reduced self-esteem, anxiety, depression, burnout, disengagement, emotional harm and physical health problems.

Yen et al. (2013) had done an empirical study to understand the impact of toxic leadership behaviour. The study result revealed that organizations with toxicity may appear normal from outside, but has a serious problem inside. Feeling of helplessness, no autonomy, no opportunity for participation, job insecurity, reduced efficiency and innovation, lower job satisfaction, psychic and emotional problems such as anxiety, depression and frustration are the symptoms of toxic leader's behavior (Ashforth, 1994).

The study has also revealed the consequences of toxic leadership at individual levels which included lack of motivation, sexual harassment (Chan et al., 2008), and decreased job satisfaction. This toxic leadership has also a positive relationship with employee turnover and employee stress, and negative relationship with organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Rayner & Cooper, 1997). In addition to this, employees whose self-esteem is neglected display low self-confidence leading to drop in individual performance (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). Employees working with toxic leaders have only two options namely, conform or depart. Leaving resulted in higher turnover ensuing in increased costs of recruitment and a possible economic consequence for the organization. Those who remain might not be committed and loyal to the organization.

Steven & David (2007) demonstrated that the negative work environment created by toxins result in very severe effects on the employees. They suffer from some physiological effects like changes in blood pressure or cholesterol levels, increases in muscle tension, and heightened awareness of the environment. Not only physiological problems, they also suffer from psychological problems like irritability, anxiety, anger, no work concentration and memory loss.

Pelletier (2010) exposed the consequences of destructive, toxic leadership behaviors at the organizational and subordinate level. At the organizational level, the researcher had found an increase in workplace deviance by subordinates working for abusive supervisors. These analyses revealed eight dimensions of leader toxicity that involved the leader breaking down followers' self-esteem, threatening employee's job and/or personal security, integrity, intimidating employees physically and mentally, and being dishonest. Leaders were also considered toxic when they fostered a divisive culture or when they failed to listen or act on employee concerns.

Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) proved the negative effect of toxic leadership both at organizational and individual levels. Organizational outcomes include negative effect on organizational performance, counter-productive work behavior and higher turnover. The awareness of the presence of toxic behaviors by the external workforce can also negatively affect an organization to attract qualified ethical candidates (Sutton, 2007). At the individual level employees lack motivation, face sexual harassment and decreased job satisfaction Zangaro et al. (2009) had identified the impact of toxic leadership on the nursing profession. Toxic leadership in the stressful nature of the job leads to lacklustre work, poor morale, decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and high turnover. Employees feel cynical and frustrated, leading to decreased energy, enthusiasm, and self-esteem. Both physical and psychological problems such as hypertension, ulcers, headaches, anxiety, depression, and anger also occur due to the stress of toxic leadership. In addition to these physical symptoms, toxic leadership causes de-motivational behaviour, which affects a nursing unit's morale and general culture (Reed, 2004).

Unhealthy work environments created by toxic leadership may produce bad outcomes for both the staff and patients. Lipman-Blumen (2005) had provided with personal and organizational policy options to keep oneself away from the impact of toxic leadership. Personal options require keeping oneself cool, concentrate in their work, creating a coalition and avoiding solo confrontations.

A recent research study conducted by Black (2015) concluded that the experience of an Army Commander's toxic leadership is an institutional cancer with the high-propensity to metastasize, leaving destruction, poison, and scars in its' path and beyond. She contended that the impact of a toxic leader extends far beyond the subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. The effects of toxic leadership flow into the marriage and home life of those who experience it.

The organizational policy options include periodic 360 reviews of toxic leaders, respectable departure options, open and democratic leadership selection process and regular accountability forums. Although this list is not exhaustive, it is a set of policy options that can serve to prevent or delimit the dysfunctional consequences of toxic leadership:

Suggestions

The only way to eliminate toxins from "climbing the ladder" in the organization would be to recognize and identify the toxins. Once the toxins are recognized by the organizations, they need to take immediate actions either to eliminate them or to modify their behaviour and impact. Future research is required in this regard to determine the relationships between the employee's attitudes, perceptions, and personality interacts. How these trio of great importance makes the employee a subservient follower of toxic leadership or to become one.

Without understanding the relationship, it would be very difficult to control the deviant behaviour exhibited by the employees. Also, once the

relationships are defined, organizations could implement diagnostic interventions to predict and control the deviant behaviours. This is recommended to determine the likelihood of those employees displaying negative behaviours and the circumstances under which these specific behaviours are displayed at extreme. It is therefore rational to design/develop and implement specific methods to identify, control or eliminate deviant behaviour before it becomes the new culture of the organization.

Conclusion

Leadership toxicity is a ubiquitous aspect of organizations, yet it attracts far less attention that it merits. It is inevitable that a leader as a human being always remain inclined to the vulnerabilities irrespective of their position, educational and professional background and experience. Many a times, the working environments are what prompt leaders towards toxicity to some extent. Leadership toxicity seems to be a pervasive aspect of organisational life undermining personal and organisational performance.

Toxic leadership could be described as a silent killer as it positions leaders as invulnerable and to sabotage, block, and penalise those who question such omnipotence. In sum, toxic leadership is a costly phenomenon. It destroys individuals, groups and organizations, even countries. Failing to deal resolutely with the complex forces that foster our acquiescence to toxic leaders will only promote the destruction such leaders create.

To conclude, without an iota of doubt, toxic leadership is extremely dangerous not only to individuals that are affected by it but also to the sustainability of the affected organization. Individuals having toxic traits and dysfunctional behaviors should not be allowed to function and grow in an organization under any circumstances. Toxic leadership behaviors will not disappear from the organizations on their own accord, until otherwise they are driven out by responsible and ethical corporate guardians.

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