

Toxic Leadership

By Karen Y. Wilson-Starks, Ph.D. President and CEO TRANSLADERSHIP, INC.

When Paul walked into his new office, everything looked pretty normal. He had met the staff, and they all appeared bright and competent. But the CEO had been clear about the mission that went with the promotion. "Paul, I'd like you to be the new VP of Marketing. Johnson is taking early retirement, partly at my suggestion. I've been disappointed with the quality and quantity of work produced by that department. Morale is also poor; people seem to be demoralized, and the effects are beginning to show. We've been losing market share for the last two years. I want you to make us competitive again."

Paul had heard about some of the problems via the grapevine. High-profile talent was acquired from leading agencies, only to have them quit in a few months. The rumor mill suggested an atmosphere that stifled creativity and innovation. Good people were attracted to the company because of its prior track record of innovation, but then they had felt boxed in by Johnson's over-controlling leadership style. Other problems included slow response to market shifts and cost overruns. Paul told himself he'd observe the department for a few days before making changes.

He was studying a wall chart showing the status of current projects when his assistant came into his office carrying a large ledger sheet with all the week's meetings marked. There were brainstorming meetings with product managers, briefings with copywriters and designers, updates from public relations, reports on direct-mail campaigns, meetings with ad agencies. Well, that wasn't too surprising. After all, most of his life was meetings these days. But something didn't look right. There didn't seem to be any cross-departmental meetings—everyone stayed ensconced in their silos. And it looked like he (Paul) was scheduled to chair every meeting. Were the people being treated as interchangeable cogs in a wheel, as he had heard?

Later that day, in his first meeting, he noted that people seemed awkward, unwilling to speak up. It was almost as if they'd never met before.

By the end of his first morning, Paul had changed his mind about waiting to make changes. He knew he had a crisis situation on his hands; if he didn't act quickly, the whole department could collapse around his head, causing further damage to the company. He called a general meeting of all marketing personnel for first thing the next morning.

There was no conference room big enough for the whole group, so the standing-room-only crowd gathered in front of Paul's office. The large wall chart had been moved outside the office and was visible to everyone in the room. A new column labeled "Team Members" had been added, and names were inserted beside each project. A meeting schedule was also posted—half an hour for each project.

When all had arrived, Paul began to speak.

“Today we begin a new way of working. I am instituting a team-based, project-oriented organizational structure.

“Based on interests, talent, and your input from our one-to-one meetings, each of you has been assigned to several project teams. The purpose of today’s meetings is to choose a leader for each team and to decide on a plan of action. By the end of the week, some of the empty cubicles will be reconfigured to create work areas where project teams can get together for impromptu problem-solving.

“Project information will be posted out here, not in my office. Each team is responsible for updating the information on this chart. In addition, Information Services will begin installing new networking software on all your computers. Effective communication is key to our future success; I want to make it easy for everyone to keep up with the latest developments.

“We will have a full-group meeting like this every Monday morning in the company auditorium to make sure we all have a big-picture view of our marketing activities. We will also use this time to celebrate completed projects and to show off our finished work.

“I know all the details haven’t been nailed down yet. And the adjustments won’t always be smooth. But we’ll work out the bugs as we go along. And I think you’ll find that pretty soon you’ll rediscover why you wanted to get into this business in the first place. You’ll begin to have fun again. And we’ll work at a productivity level that will make the rest of the company wonder what happened!”

Paul took comments and questions from the floor, answering the ones he could, and writing down others for future discussion. “That’s all for now. The first team meeting is in fifteen minutes.”

This scenario—somewhat exaggerated, but not much—illustrates what I call “toxic leadership.” Johnson, the previous marketing VP, had been a toxic leader; as a result, the employees, the company, and Paul (the new VP) were suffering the consequences.

What is toxic leadership?

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.

What are the symptoms of toxic leadership?

In a toxic leadership environment, people are rewarded for agreeing with the boss and punished for thinking differently. In a toxic leadership environment, “yes” people are rewarded and are promoted to leadership roles, while people who more fully engage their mental resources, critical thinking, and questioning skills are shut out from decision-making and positions of influence.

Toxic leadership often causes a high turnover rate, a decline in productivity, less innovation, and interdepartmental conflict.

What characteristics describe a toxic leader?

Although each situation is unique there are three downstream consequences of “leading” by power and control. All three were illustrated in our opening story. First is a stifling of creativity. By tightly controlling the projects, Johnson effectively prevented his people from thinking outside the rigid boxes he had erected. He was not looking for creativity. He merely wanted robotic foot soldiers to carry out *his* orders, *his* vision. The second consequence is lack of communication. By isolating people and strictly controlling information, Johnson made his people less effective, increased their frustration level, and encouraged mistrust. Third, when mistrust increases, productive relationships are not likely to develop. We saw that the people in our story had not developed strong personal and working relationships. Instead, they were uneasy around each other, almost strangers.

What causes a person to become a toxic leader?

Some toxic leaders have had poor role models. Since they were mentored by toxic leaders, they operate under a faulty definition of leadership. Often they are vocal advocates of “strong leadership,” but they have a distorted definition of strength. They think they have to control everything, not realizing that over-controlling produces toxic effects like those we observed in this story. And toxic leaders receive a certain level of ego gratification from over-controlling. Finally, toxic leaders may have unresolved psychological issues (such as fear of the unknown, fear of failure, mistrust of people, feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, or extreme overconfidence) that they avoid by exercising toxic leadership.

The net result of all these factors is that toxic leaders fail to appreciate the uniqueness of being human, and this distorted view of human nature drives the way they relate to people who work for them. Human beings are complex, social beings, and they have intrinsic value that goes far beyond whatever salary they receive or the position they hold. They are more effective and productive, and their satisfaction level is higher, when they are treated as people—that is, when they communicate, form relationships, and exercise their creativity.

The toxic leader treats people as robots, defined by whatever function the leader expects them to perform. Thus the toxic leader is dealing with only a small portion of that person. People pick up on this, and respond by being only “partly there”—in other words, their commitment to their work and their connection with the company are tentative at best. Over time, they’re likely to see their work as “only a job.” So the irony is that by attempting to control every aspect of a person, the toxic leader actually controls less of the person, and thus has less control.

What effects can toxic leadership have on a company?

In addition to diminished commitment on the part of employees, toxic leadership can produce systemic damage throughout an organization. Under toxic leaders, employees have basically two options: conform or leave. Those who remain will experience a diminishing of expectations. Some will be aware that the situation is less than ideal; these people may keep hoping that the situation will change, or be on the lookout for the right time to leave. Others, however, may come to see toxic leadership as normal, and conform willingly. These will be groomed to be the next generation of toxic leaders!

People like this have the same effect on an organization that termites have on a wooden house. On the outside, things look normal; but there is serious trouble just under the surface. When such a company faces unusual stresses—a depressed economy, for instance—more demands will be put on the workforce. Like a termite-infested house, the organization crumbles from within.

Can toxic leaders change?

It's not easy, but change is possible. First, the leader needs to recognize the need for change. This usually requires a crisis. The most effective motivation is pressure from the toxic leader's boss. If the toxic leader is given an ultimatum—change, or else!—he or she might realize the need for a change. Second, the leader must be determined enough to commit to the process of change. Personal transformation is seldom easy, especially when you're trying to change the habits of a lifetime. Third, I've found that creative coaching is needed to guide and support the leader through the transformation process. It's useful to meet with the leader one-on-one, analyze his or her specific needs, and help develop a specific plan custom-designed for that leader's situation.

Personal transformation is not easy, and many toxic leaders ultimately refuse to change. But if a leader will persevere, the rewards are significant. Not only will the leader's employees and company benefit, but the leader will acquire a new set of leadership techniques and methods, enjoy new (and healthier) sources of ego gratification, and become a healthier role model for the next generation of leaders.

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