

A Toxic Leader Manifesto

Toxic leaders raise our ire because they are bullies and destroyers.

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Troubled organizations are shell shocked. They need help with nastiness in high places. We struggle to understand adult bullies, vicious liars and vindictive, hurtful leaders. Damaged heart surgeons and traumatized CEOs humiliate subordinates and demean colleagues during bypasses and downsizings. What to do?

In this article I have developed a *toxic leader manifesto*. A toxic leader manifesto reveals behaviors critical to destructive and nasty rule. It is a platform that dastardly leaders share ranging from corporate demons Bernie Madoff, Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling to the deplorable political likes of Adolf, Benito, Fidel and a long litany of self-righteous demagogues.

Brace yourself for a menu of destructive behaviors utilized by toxic leaders to immerse subordinates in loss of face and the demolition of human dignity. Let us briefly visit the demonic tendencies of an allegedly elite, perverted and an occasionally brilliant few who specialize in publicly humiliating employees. Here's a step by step itinerary of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and characteristics of abusive leaders who specialize in workplace intimidation and belittlement. This twenty-five point toxic leader manifesto is provided as a service for those involved in human resources, executive boards and consulting as well as those who are walking the plank and wondering whether they are in the midst of a horrible boss.

Alternately, in the event that you are aspiring to become a toxic leader or want to enhance your capacity for some the following manifesto may be of service. But I sincerely hope not. What follows has been gathered in my capacities as a professor, researcher, coach and consultant from the dark side of management.

TOXIC LEADERSHIP MANIFESTO

- 1. It is essential for the toxic and abusive leader to bypass dialogue and Q&A;
- 2. The toxic leader must attack, deflate or discard employees who are identified as lacking in any way or who dare to challenge declarations and decrees from the top;
- 3. Employees who are ranked beneath a toxic leader are identified as operating at a distinct disadvantage and they should be treated accordingly;
- 4. Bullying developed in childhood is transferable into adulthood and the professional life of the toxic leader; bullying must be cultivated and nurtured via vigorous continuous improvement;
- 5. Thou shalt yell at and demean employees who fall short, error or are deemed annoying;
- 6. Thou shalt stifle any workplace conversation that is directed toward questioning toxic leader authority or decision making;
- 7. Toxic leaders are placed on notice that privately and discreetly conducted verbal attacks against subordinates lack sufficient force, vigor and shame and must be brought out into public forums for all to witness;
- 8. It is mandatory that yelling at subpar subordinates be conducted by toxic leaders in public in an effort to promote fear, humiliation and sufficient loss of face;

- 9. Public humiliation of employees is not just a right of toxic leadership, it is a duty and is central to annual performance appraisals and continuous improvement of an embarrassing and inadequate workforce;
- 10. Solving workplace screw-ups requires on-the-spot, quick & between-the-eyes abrasive questioning and abrupt, consolidated decision making on the part of toxic leadership; toxic leaders will always be extremely diligent about not admitting any voluntary input from subordinates re: screw-ups;
- 11. A toxic leader demands immediate, piercing, cut-through-the-bull-answers to pointed questions aggressively directed toward subordinates in public arenas;
- 12. When criticizing employees, this must be carried forth harshly, publicly and without any opportunity for substantive response, whatsoever;
- 13. Leader criticism of underlings is a monologue not a dialogue; an exchange of ideas or the notion of a constructive conversation is outside the boundaries of toxic leaders who must reprimand, demean and lead employees around like dogs on a leash;
- 14. Civilized and substantive feedback is the mortal enemy of the top down toxic leader;
- 15. Progressive, liberal notions of empowerment and democracy are left wing fictions to be repressed, discouraged, trivialized and eliminated in an extremely timely fashion;
- 16. Employees deemed insufficient, inadequate or failing are not to be empowered within a toxic organizational system or provided any tangible means for self-improvement and enhancement;
- 17. The word of the toxic boss is complete and final and may not be brought under review to any other person, department, judge or entity within an organization or outside the company;
- 18. In support of a toxic leader an organization bestows as close to absolute 360 degree power as possible with all dissention heavily penalized;
- 19. In response to toxic leaders there are to be zero tangible or practical employee outlets for challenges to authority;
- 20. A repertoire of smiles, facial expressions and a variety of nonverbal veneers are essential to the toxic leader who may have to conceal pending judgments and admonishments from subordinates;
- 21. Facial and eye expressions conveying innocence, cluelessness and bewilderment are essential to the toxic leader's veneer and the concealment of anger, venom, and pending outrage and bullying;
- 22. Aspiring toxic leaders do well to choose role models and prototypes to analyze and emulate during the course of their training in destructive and demeaning behavior; toxic leader mentoring is vigorously encouraged; accordingly, masterful toxic leaders are expected to volunteer as mentors;
- 23. Toxic leaders build from the ground up and demand 101% allegiance from all relevant departments, individuals and entities within the organization - in an effort to achieve complete, utter unanimity and the elimination of dissention, debates or diversity of views in response to toxic proclamations and rulings;
- 24. Toxic leaders master and regularly engage in "double talk" and sophisticated gobbledygook or verbal gymnastics in order to persuade themselves, subordinates and media that they are glorious, uplifting and chosen leaders who are certainly not destructive, villainous or toxic; and
- 25. Toxic leaders will take note of the psychological, emotional and adrenaline highs experienced when

in an agitated state and in the process of abusing unworthy subordinates; efforts must be made to neurologically dissect, simulate and communicate-via-mentoring this "rush" and supernatural feeling of exhilaration when bullying targeted underlings.

COMMENTARY

Essential is the fact that there are bona fide patterns and predictable clusters of toxic leader behavior. As a human resource director or a member of an executive board you may be in a position to locate a nasty one or a formidable bully and determine that he appears to regularly exhibit fifteen or more of the behaviors cited in the toxic leader manifesto. But it may also be the case that you have a superior who is going through a very rough several months and she is temporarily being bent out of shape. The key is that over a dozen of the behaviors be manifest from the manifesto on a very regular and prolonged basis over time. For further information on recognizing toxic leaders and learning about the detoxification process see my recent books, *Transforming Toxic Leaders* (Stanford University Press) and *Destructive Leaders and Dysfunctional Organizations* (Cambridge University Press).

I trust that you will play with this manifesto and that it be a source of cynical amusement or enlightenment. Occasionally you will recognize a CEO, division manager, significant other, or ex-spouse who fits many of these behaviors. Perhaps this individual is in fact toxic. Or alternately the leader in question may be uniquely toxic only when engaged in a long term relationship with *you*. Similarly, be cautious not to pin the "toxic" label on a boss without a worthy or substantial sample of behavior. Don't jump to conclusions. The general gold standard for diagnosis of toxicity is that of the very, very patient psychotherapist or an observant anthropologist on an extremely long tether. Complex humans require multifaceted, prolonged observation and this in turn may lead to a differential diagnosis. Accordingly, keep in mind that this twenty-five step manifesto is necessarily incomplete and cannot begin to cover all dimensions of toxic leader behavior.

Toxic leaders raise our ire and interest because they are bullies, destroyers and epitomize the dark side and the farther reaches of bad behavior in professional life. But we must carefully sort through the agitators and those who are masters at demeaning and belittling - and eventually go beyond diagnosis and intervention and ask what the toxic leader can teach us. It is more than just detecting, confronting and dealing with these perversions and subversions - it is also all about the subtext. While the toxic leader's personality and behavior is 75% or 87% devoured in destruction and dysfunction of colleagues and subordinates - the scary part is that on a very, very bad day or during a dark week that you and I are perhaps capable of reaching 30% to 40% levels of agitation, bullying and disruption. Is this just part of the human condition that we embody some elements of destructive, toxic behavior within our repertoire? Or can we lessen the presence and impact of these darker tendencies? It has been my experience that face-to-face engagement with more toxic extremes leads to deeper self-analysis and increasingly meaningful personal reckonings.

Simply put, the toxic leader may very well serve as an impetus for better understanding the dark side of management within oneself and in the workplace at large.

But is this article on toxic leaders relevant to you and your company? Why not ask the question now that you have made your way through over 1,600 words and the next to last paragraph? In response I can offer that many of us are in direct contact with abusive managers who may qualify as toxic. Others can state with extreme certainty that they are victims of a toxic leader. In some cases a toxic leader may in fact have a history of psychopathology or a personality disorder. Such cases are more extreme and are addressed in a few of my earlier articles on this blog.

Accordingly, perhaps this twenty five point manifesto can be of use. For example, there are those among us who question whether an irritating and occasionally threatening company president, law firm head or orthopedic surgeon qualifies for the cut when we are attempting to cope with a grossly hovering and smothering leadership style or an inappropriately dark and depressive personality. Can very high echelon

professionals with the capacity for brilliance also occupy toxic leader terrain? In a word, "yes."

I trust that this probing of toxic leaders raises a few pertinent questions for troubled organizations and points toward prospects for diagnosis and intervention. For those leaders and companies who are doing quite well - tuck this manifesto away for potentially interesting conversation or for future application to a bully of a leader who has yet to appear. *Who knows?*