



## Can Toxic Leaders Change or Be Changed?

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Have you heard the phrase "toxic leader"? While no single definition exists, most agree that toxic leaders have disregard for their subordinates and a general negative impact on organizational climate. Toxic leaders affect the confidence, morale, and ability of followers to do and sustain good work. Regardless of the forms toxic leaders can take, the affect they have on others remains similar. Stress rises, risk-taking diminishes, creativity suffers, and people hunker down, shying away from collaborating, limiting communication and working as alone as possible. All are self-protection moves. None contributes to organizational well-being.

Toxic leaders are not necessarily bad people. Ironically, their performance does lead them to get promoted. But, once in those leadership positions, they create unhappy people and unhealthy environments. It is in the "how" each of us leads that our own weakness, fear, and insecurity affect others. In 2009 a [Harvard Business Review article](#) cited research that indicated that the result of incivility alone results in a 48 percent decrease in work effort and 38 percent decrease in work quality. To begin, we have to shift thoughts about these leaders from one of blaming them for their destructive behavior to one of seeing them as unsettled people themselves. Labeling them 'toxic people' makes it a personal matter. We think about their behavior as toxic.

## **Discover if Your leadership is Toxic to Others**

What would happen if a leader asked him or herself, "Am I a toxic leader?" "Do my actions feel toxic to those I serve?" The answer involves more than watching and listening because if toxicity is present few will dare speak out truthfully. So, how can you get an honest answer? It involves both courage and a willingness to be vulnerable.

Anthropology professor David Matsuda investigated toxic leadership in the Army. His study was provoked by a question about the suicide rate among soldiers. Matsuda's study was intended to discover the attributes of the soldiers who took their own lives. But he decided to include the study of their leaders. The findings were revealing.

The standard investigation of a suicide in the Army is to ask what was wrong with the individual soldier, such as a history of mental illness or a marital breakup. Matsuda decided to take a "different angle" and discovered that soldiers who took their own lives usually did have personal problems, but they also had leaders who were pushing them over the edge by making their lives a living hell ([Forbes.com](http://Forbes.com)).

The pressures and stresses felt in schools seems to have become constant. Although some blame the board, the county, the state, or the federal government, many see the school and district leadership as responsible. Accompanied by the pressures of modern life, feeling like one is being 'pushed to the edge' is becoming more common among educators. If you are involved in a blame game, the likelihood of the result is an unhealthy environment. And the environment of a school and district, the health or the dysfunction, is led by those in charge.

If the environment is one of unhappy, misunderstood, stressed adults, children will always pay a price. In a time when we need to be looking for ways to change schools to be places where teaching and learning better reflect the skills and knowledge needed today, we need the adults to be thinking and envisioning, researching, experimenting, taking risks, trusting each other, being creative, thinking critically, collaborating, and communicating well and respectfully. Toxic leaders shut all that down. So, if for no other reason that the needs of the students we serve, questioning how our behavior lands on those most directly serving the students is important.

## **Are you Working for a Toxic Leader?**

There is a problem inherent in our profession. Many attracted to it because they are risk-averse. The stability, job protection, and tradition of education are appealing. Not only is it difficult to change practice, it also limits one's ability to be mobile, leaving one environment and finding another. Although there is movement in upper level district leadership positions, few teachers move among districts to find better working conditions. In those cases, teachers close their doors, do their jobs, look to the union contact and hope the leader will leave. Sometimes, school leaders do the same things. In that scenario, little changes in teaching and learning and if it does, it is behind closed doors, for those children, in that classroom only. That is not the kind of environment we need in schools now.

We suggest that you start paying attention to this issue. The Army is a decade out in front with their investigation of the issue. They know that training helps free subordinates to begin conversations but that in the end such behaviors must be eliminated...by individuals changing themselves or by

organizations replacing them. The weariness that comes from working in an environment that is unhealthy affects everyone in the organization. Ignoring the stress, working above or around it may seem like a solution, but it is not. A stressed teacher and a stressed faculty can only do so much to hide the stress and dysfunction from the children. Students are most vulnerable in the organization. They are the recipients of the stressors in the organization. So if unwilling to address the leader's behavior for the sake of the well being of the adults, recognize the affect it has on the children charged with learning and growing in our care. They need and deserve a healthy place to be as they develop.

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