

# Identifying **TOXIC LEADERSHIP** & Building Worker Resilience

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**A BASIC ASSUMPTION** about establishing a values-based safety culture is that topmost management is supportive and drives down needed changes. Lovelace (2012) agrees:

Society romanticizes the idea of leadership and its influence on the organization and its members. With minor exception, the majority of researchers who ex-

#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Toxic leaders work for themselves or against the goals of their organizations, resulting in a dysfunctional environment.
- This article seeks to help management understand how organizational conditions can allow some leaders to become toxic.
- It describes how workers and managers can defend themselves and their organizations against toxic leaders.
- Finally, it explains how authentic leaders can build a culture of morale and improved organizational resilience.

amine leaders, their behaviors and the outcomes they produce focus on the positive, while ignoring the negative and even destructive behaviors and influence of certain leaders.

Yet not all organizations have CEOs or vice presidents who foster a supportive leader-development environment; some are dismissive or even hostile (Winn & Dykes, 2017). But much worse and working under the radar of this romanticized ideal of leader development are toxic leaders who work for themselves or against the goals of their parent organizations, resulting in a poisonous, dysfunctional environment.

When the toxic leader creates a hostile workplace, it results in negative but pervasive consequences that trickle down and create a stressful environment that adversely affects the subordinate's professional and personal life. This covert, destructive behavior is a stressor that costs organizations billions of dollars

worldwide in disability claims and lost productivity. It also causes susceptible individuals real stress. According to the stressor-stress-strain model, the connection between toxic leaders and destructive behaviors necessarily begets many negative consequences (Barling, 2007; Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

One danger is that rising safety professionals and engineers may be especially susceptible to toxic leaders. Millennials will compose 75% of the U.S. workforce by 2025. While these incoming professionals may be altruistic and idealistic, they have little work experience when they begin their careers. This naivete may allow them to buy into the ethical relativism offered by toxic leaders. In addition, Millennials may be less inclined or less able to counteract the effects of their toxic surroundings until they are trained in simple resilience techniques offered by several authors (Duckworth, 2016; Trickey & Hyde, 2009; Winn, Rozman & Dean, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to:

- 1) help all levels of management understand how conditions in their organization may allow some leaders to act in their own interests (i.e., become toxic) and how organizations may tacitly acquiesce;
- 2) help senior management identify and root out toxic leaders, thus reducing psychological and physiological stressors in their systems;
- 3) describe how workers and managers at the department level can defend themselves and their organizations against the effects of toxic leaders;
- 4) describe how Millennial leaders, their subordinates and their organizations can defend against toxic leadership and become more resilient as a result.

Once these challenges are understood and addressed, authentic leaders can take positive steps to build a culture of morale and improved organizational resilience. New research on grit, replacing raw talent as a predictor of success, may offer unique solutions.

## Background

Toxic leadership is a fairly new subject stemming from studies in the U.S. military. Army researchers investigating the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide have taken a new approach by looking at leadership (externally) and not just mental illness or problems with subordinate individuals (internally). In this early research, certain leaders were found to be acting subversively in their own best interests and not those of their workers. For the first time, the study of leadership lost some of its patina and halo effect.

Even with the difficulties of a soldier being separated from loved ones or the stress of being in a war environment, commanders noticed something else causing stress. The Army hired sociologists and anthropologists to find out what was causing the high suicide rates; the top brass thought the scientists should ask a different kind of question. When conditions were already stressful, “suicidal behavior can be triggered by . . . toxic command climate,” says David Matsuda, one of the original scientists looking into causes of soldier suicide (Zwerdling, 2014).

Following these early leads, Jean Lipman-Blumen (2005b), a former military officer, was one of the first to write extensively on destructive leadership outside the military arena. She defines the toxic leader as “an individual who, by virtue of their destructive behaviors and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflicts serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations and communities—even nations—that they serve.” She continues:

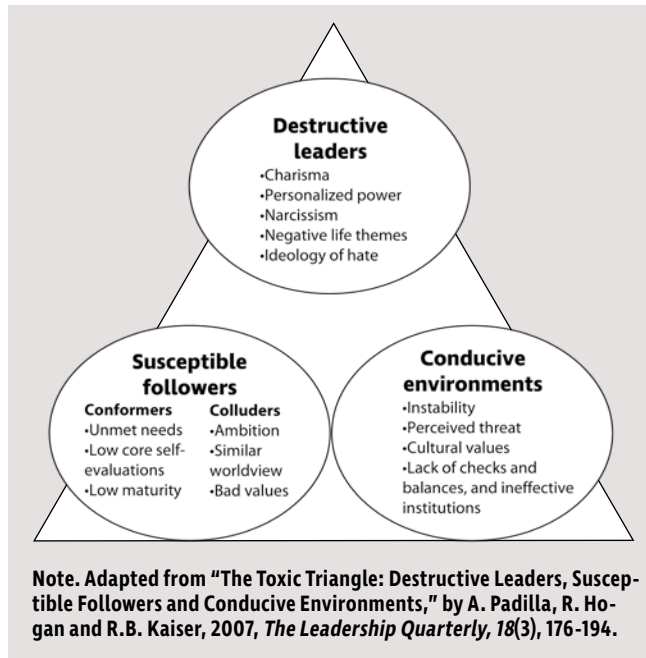
Toxic leaders comfort us with reassuring and often grand illusions that life in the factory or in the family will work out just fine. By signing on to their grand illusions, we can work on our immortality projects. There are only two catches. For one, to achieve this desired state, we must agree to do just as the leader says—no ifs, ands or buts. Thus, just like when we were children, dependent upon parents whose rules we followed in exchange for love, safety and Oreos, we now trade our obedience and autonomy for the toxic leader’s pledge of security, certainty and other goodies, including a shot at life eternal.

The second catch is equally serious. Toxic leaders do not fulfill their promises, but not because they wouldn’t fulfill them if they could. The real tragedy of the human condition is not that we all must die, but, rather, that we choose to live by grand illusions, rather than to face our fears. Hence, we fall into the clutches of toxic leaders who promise us the moon, knowing full well they cannot deliver. In the worst of all cases, toxic leaders fall under the spell of their own grand illusions and believe that they cannot honor their pledges because, by their very nature, these promises are unfulfillable. The guarantees of safety, certainty, success, endlessly soaring stock prices, immortality and other desiderata are simply illusions. (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a)

Once the concept of toxic leadership dawned upon the military’s behavioral strategists, it was found to be pervasive in some units. According to one estimate, 20% of U.S. Army soldiers suffer from the effects of toxic leadership, which is now slightly redefined from Lipman-Blumen this way in the Army’s “leadership bible”: Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization and mission performance (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b).

In the nonmilitary workplace, stresses on individuals show up as well, so the older term *PTSD* may not apply just to soldiers anymore (Sweeney, Matthews & Lester, 2011; Violanti, Andrew, Burchfiel, et al., 2007). However, stresses show up more for certain jobs such as police or firefighters who must deal with the after-effects of motor vehicle crashes, natural disasters and, increasingly, active shooter and domestic terrorism events. It is not only soldiers who are shot at or who must see and handle bodies. The stresses add up bit by bit and manifest as psychological or physiological effects, or both. A pushy, self-centered, arrogant leader may push a soldier or worker over the edge.

When the toxic leader creates a hostile workplace, often, few obvious signs exist, but eventually it results in negative, pervasive consequences. These effects trickle down and create a stressful environment that adversely affects the subordinate’s professional and personal life. According to Xie and Schaubroek (2001) and Aryee, Chen, Sun, et al. (2007), psychological and physiological stress are below-the-surface problems that cost many organizations billions of dollars worldwide in disability claims, lost productivity, absenteeism and turnover. According to the stressor-stress-strain model, the connections between destructive behaviors begets negative consequences (Barling, 2007; Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Workers do not know who to trust, and they see a toxic leader as the person who covertly bends rules to suit him/herself while still appearing to be the safety “go-to” individual.

**FIGURE 1****TOXIC TRIANGLE: ELEMENTS IN THREE DOMAINS RELATED TO DESTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP**

Perhaps worst, toxic leadership preys on young or inexperienced employees who may not see the hazards and certainly not the stress that is sure to come. While Millennials may be altruistic and idealistic, they may buy into the ethical relativism (application of ethics or values contingent upon conditions, not held as universal truths) offered by toxic leaders (Howe, Strauss & Matson, 2000; Winn & Slagley, 2016). New hires may be especially less inclined or less able to counteract the effects of their toxic surroundings until they are trained in simple resilience techniques offered by several authors (Duckworth, 2016; Trickey & Hyde, 2009; Winn, Rozman & Dean, 2015).

Let's be honest, examination of leadership and leader development over decades, if not centuries, has truly been as Lovelace suggests, romanticized. As a society, we consider a leader to be the highest and purest form of action-motivator in the organization. We look up to historical leaders; we idealize religious leaders; we emulate business leaders. We have not broadly considered what happens when a leader's behaviors become destructive, consciously or not, and the outcomes are, by and large, negative. Could a leader act in the interest of other than their followers and organization? And, if so, what happens?

The toxic leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves, destroying initiative and morale.

One reason that toxic leadership persists in the U.S. Army is because performance is evaluated in a top-down fashion. In a military chain of command, this means that toxic leaders can keep subordinates under their thumb, and they are pretty good at currying favor with superiors. Hence, toxic leaders remain in place and are even promoted, despite their toxic ways.

A new bottom-up evaluation procedure that enables subordinates to evaluate leaders shows promise (Wilson & Darwin At Work, 2014). In some nonmilitary settings, the structure is similar and surely exists in state police units and EMS offices that operate with near-military rules. It can flourish in unionized environments or line-authority organizations, as well.

**How Toxic Leaders Emerge**

The Padilla model (discussed in the next section) shows that toxic leaders need a conducive environment and susceptible followers. To get that far, toxic leaders likely have had poor role models because they personalize power for themselves (the first Padilla characteristic). 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 must control everything, not realizing that overcontrolling produces toxic effects.

Toxic leaders receive a certain level of ego gratification from overcontrolling. They also 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.

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 present. In other words, their commitment to their work and their connection with the company are tentative at best. Over time, they will likely see their work as just a job (Reed, 2004).

**The Toxic Triangle**

Toxic leaders have three characteristics (Figure 1; Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). First, they lack genuine concern for subordinates. We all know people ostensibly in leadership positions, but their actions say, "look at me" and not "how can I help?" Toxic leaders bully and intimidate because they see followers as "disposable resources they can use as they see fit" (Lovelace, 2012).

Of course, subordinates are not disposable resources; on the contrary, they are the very core—the building blocks—of institutional skills and knowledge in an industry or company where it takes years to know all the rules and gain insights. These people are skilled and trained craftspeople, not children, which even the fresh graduate or new-hire craftsperson knows.

Second, they have susceptible followers. Those people are conformers, in their words, followers who have unmet needs and who tend to have low self-esteem. They also may have a low degree of emotional maturity. But while these followers are easy to influence by a toxic leader, they also likely hold a similar worldview and may be ambitious, which makes this union of weakened follower and destructive leader more likely.

Lovelace (2012) notes that toxic leaders "lack interpersonal skills or have destructive personalities which have an extremely negative effect on the climate of the organization." These destructive behaviors include gossiping, working around established and formal channels of authority, or, as Lovelace says, toxic leaders "support in-fighting, abuse their informational power [structure] and behave aggressively."

Third, toxic or destructive leaders operate in environments best conducive to themselves. These conducive environments are unstable in nature (war, organizational upheaval, maybe a multiple fatality); pose single or multiple threats to followers; offer a direct threat to the cultural values; or operate in an environment lacking checks and balances (Padilla, et al., 2007). Nobody is out there looking for a toxic leader who is essentially preying on susceptible followers.

So, using the Padilla, et al. (2007), model we see that the matter of toxic leadership is not simply one of bad leader/good followers. Sadly, the toxic leader must have willing or naive followers despite the countervailing indications in the environment. For these followers, it is easier to go along than go alone.

Padilla, et al. (2007), continue with some important observations about destructive leadership:

- Destructive leadership is seldom entirely destructive. Leaders, in concert with followers and the environment, contribute to outcomes distributed along a destructive-constructive continuum, with outcomes related to destructive leadership primarily falling at the negative end of this spectrum. Some of the worst political and business leaders, even Hitler, Mao and Mussolini, created some positive outcomes for their constituents.

- The process of destructive leadership involves dominance, coercion and manipulation rather than influence, persuasion and commitment.

- The process of destructive leadership has a selfish orientation; it is focused more on the leader's needs than the needs of the larger social group.

- The effects of destructive leadership are outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents and detract from the organization's main purposes.

- Destructive organizational outcomes are not exclusively the result of destructive leaders but are also products of susceptible followers and conducive environments.

### **How to Identify a Destructive Leader**

Ostensible leaders who work for their own goals may not even know they are doing so. There are some warning signs that mark a leader as toxic. In the following excerpts, Kim (2016) suggests several red flags:

- 1) Unwillingness to listen to feedback: Leadership is about leading people, which includes listening to those on the front lines, those at different levels of management, and all of their meaningful concerns. Some leaders unfortunately emphasize their own desires and ideas at the expense of any receptivity.

- 2) Excessive self-promotion and self-interest: While it is important for leaders to provide guidance and clear goals to their employees, it should not be at the expense of any other goal except their own self-advancement. Narcissism has its limits.

- 3) Lying and inconsistency: Nothing undermines a leader more than backtracking or shuffling on rules or guidelines they set up for their employees.

- 4) Lack of moral philosophy: Leaders need to have a guiding ethical core that informs their decisions and how they decide to prioritize and work with the people around them. They need to care about values like fairness, social justice, equitable behavior, empathy and humanism.

- 5) Rewarding incompetence and lack of accountability: Bad leaders can sometimes be so disconnected as to refuse to see toxic or incompetent employees also poisoning the workplace around them, even if the leaders themselves are not engaging in those behaviors directly.

- 6) Cliques: Insecure leaders will often surround themselves with a small cadre of "yes" people who parrot and mirror themselves completely. Clique behavior causes dissent and splitting within an organization, and breeds resentment.

- 7) Bullying and harassment: In the worst-case scenario, a leader may become frankly abusive and belittling to people around them, using attacking or foul language or threats or coercion.

### **How to Avoid Toxic Leadership: A Model for Leader Development**

Not all organizations have CEOs or vice presidents who foster a supportive leader-development environment; some may be disinterested, some may be unaware and some may not appreciate internal change. In a 2017 presentation, the authors suggested a model to counter the effects of toxic leadership by growing safety and engineering leaders out of the spotlight even in this kind of depleted environment:

Under favorable circumstances, leader development and culture change can happen at lower levels which are removed from the overt power structure. Even when upper management is dismissive, disinterested or merely unaware, the motivated junior leader can change culture on his or her own using this model as a guide and modifying it as local needs warrant.

While having a local honor code [statement of values] might seem out of fashion for Millennials, these have been in place and changing lives for decades at our nation's military institutions. So why not in industry, too? After all, an honor code as simple as the 13 words at West Point or the Virginia Military Institute is essentially the same as the code of ethics for [ASSP] or the National Society for Professional Engineers. An honor code can look like this: "Smith Trucking holds the safety of its drivers and the community in highest regard. Smith Trucking employees will not knowingly violate safety rules and it will not tolerate those who do."

The structure provided by Hesselbein and Shinseki (2004) known as be-know-do is the glue that underpins the U.S Army's entire leader development program because it anticipates initiative and leadership from mid-level soldiers who, if sufficiently preferred, can act in time to prevent losses. Mid-level soldiers are specifically trained to step up—to act on their own and so save time and human capital.

Storytelling [reinforces and] clarifies important messages in informal ways, and the best stories are those generated by the workers themselves. There is an authenticity to a story told in the break room that has credibility with craftspeople and the ability to alter the local safety culture far beyond the leadership charts and mission graphs in some corporate annual report.

Finally, those craftspeople who display personal courage out of the view of upper management sometimes want it that way. Their strength of character—what they do speaks louder than what they say—makes them a local icon, a local hero even if it's just among departmental regulars. But then, isn't that the entire point: to decentralize safety responsibilities? (Winn & Dykes, 2017)

### **What This Means for Safety Professionals or Project Engineers Assigned to Safety**

Anyone assigned to manage the safety function cannot afford to harbor or allow toxic leaders to flourish. A toxic leader might allow certain people certain latitude because it makes him/her feel good. The toxic leader may unnecessarily bully young or inexperienced workers. A toxic leader is much like the "look at me be safe" person until no one is watching, then s/he reverts to actions that serve his/her ego or agenda. Worse, the toxic leader

allows subordinates to work unsafely because it serves his/her own purposes at the peril of employees.

Safety leaders cannot violate their own honor code. That is, they cannot look away from safety violations or practice “just this once” for any reason. Craftspeople know immediately that this leader is toxic: s/he has no central core values that direct those actions. On the other hand, an authentic safety culture is essential for organizational and personal survival when it comes to safety. The safety leader must act in accordance with all three aspects of the values that play out in their organization, including artifactual (visual), espoused (stated) and values-in-use (reflexive or instinctive) expression of personal and organizational values (Schein, 2010). A toxic leader may buy jackets with a safety slogan but ignore fall protection rules; that person shows artifactual values, but not values-in-use, and that leader is, by definition, not authentic. The consequences of toxic leadership in safety may infect the organization and they may be deadly to the persons involved.

### **Toxic Leadership & the Millennial Generation**

Any discussion in the popular press about the generation commonly known as Millennials probably begins labeling them as idealistic and overprotected. But reading a bit more closely, these emerging professionals are actually leading the charge on some hot-button topics such as gun control by becoming far more active in the political process than their parents. We have only to read about high school students who speak frankly with legislators about inaction over gun control, for example (Campo-Flores & Hackman, 2018).

Millennials are empirically different on various measures that suggest they may be vulnerable to toxic leaders. Sociological and organizational behavioral research available in the past decade suggests that the Millennial generation represents a significant group of people who are socially unique.

A prominent book describes the Millennial generation, sometimes called the Y generation (Howe & Strauss, 2004). These are people born between 1982 and 2002. The author characterizes the generation as “overprotected but still eager to learn.” [The] Millennial generation is different enough from other generations that special methods of training them may be required.

The first of the Millennials started their working careers in about 2002 and they have entered middle management in about 2012. The Millennials represent a 20-year span of people born after Generation X. They have solidly entered the workforce after college, about 2002-2004, and now 10 to 12 years later, they are entering leadership slots. In terms of size, the Millennial generation is big, indeed, very big. In fact, it is the biggest generation to come along in 50 years. (Winn, Rozman & Dean, 2015)

Trickey and Hyde (2009) conducted a 10-year qualitative study that focused on the dark side of leadership from the generational perspective. Despite the negative opinions about Millennials, the results from the study revealed that this generation of followers prefers to abide by the rules, strives to please others, delivers work of high quality, has little trust in leadership and demonstrates low self-efficacy. These findings indicate that Millennial followers may be susceptible to leadership with a destructive demeanor because they are more compliant and less assertive with those in supervisory positions (Martin, 2014).

The authors’ own survey research of graduate students at West Virginia University and several regionally matched institutions suggests that Millennial graduates have essentially no management experience, and more than half have never worked at a full-time job at hiring-on time. These incoming professionals surveyed in our research and graduating in various majors indicate altruism but some degree of rashness and naivete. Winn, Williams and Heafey (2013) presented findings, including these key points:

- Survey participants missed opportunities in summer work to learn about how people interact and how businesses operate. Those students who did not work missed basic opportunities to pick up experience with basic office rules and procedures.
- Survey participants seem altruistic and would act ethically on intuition alone. We see this as a missed opportunity to learn altruism firsthand.
- Survey participants understand that professionals must read widely, but at this stage of their career preparation, they do not. This is a missed opportunity to gain historical or industry perspective.

The authors concluded from these surveys that graduating Millennials were not misguided as much as they were simply inexperienced; altruistic, yes, but somewhat naïve about assessing risk. Hipple (2014) observes that with Millennials, texting is becoming the primary mode of communication. It has already become a means of jumping the chain of command as a condoned communication tool. A manipulative but toxic leader could take advantage of such employees by working outside the official lines of authority and communication, creating cliques and, ultimately, resentment and disintegration of authority. Nobody would know whom to trust.

Of course, the big question presents itself for the purpose of this article: How can today’s incoming professionals be expected to identify, much less challenge, toxic leaders if we are unaware of the deleterious effects of toxic leaders, especially if they are unwilling to confront authority (Martin, 2014)? How can we better prepare incoming managers and their subordinates to identify and withstand toxic leaders?

### **Building Department-Level Resilience Against Toxic Leaders**

Can a perceptive leader build resilience against toxic leaders at the department level? In short, the answer is yes, but it will take some work. Several simple suggestions can help junior safety leaders or project engineers immunize themselves. These suggestions can work individually or together.

First, junior professionals can gain self-awareness through the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory or True Colors personality assessment. Each is commonly used by organizations as large as West Point or as small as a local hospital to help individuals and their supervisors understand preferences, biases, interests, motivations and, especially, values. The more a new hire knows about his/her own behaviors, the less susceptible and more resilient s/he will be.

Next, the supervisor can consider using regular peer evaluations of leaders’ performance. These are used increasingly and with more impact than ever. Lovelace (2012, citing Reed) says, “a toxic leader may be able to fool their supervisors . . . but they will not be able to pull the wool over the eyes of peers and subordinates.”

Third, the alert supervisor should help subordinates avoid solo confrontations with almost anyone. Lipman-Blumen (2005a) says:

Confrontations without witnesses open the possibility for the leader to twist the encounter into a “you

said/she said" scenario. Bringing a small, but well-regarded, group to a confrontation with the leader will impress upon him that you are not alone, that influential others share your concerns, and that this meeting is completely on the record.

Fourth, a junior leader can consult with known and trusted colleagues who interact with the toxic leader. Seeking the advice of the respected opinion leaders in the organization who are recognized as wise will build resilience and strength, and not allow the toxic leader to have undue influence on a new hire. The experienced manager can steer the new hire toward trusted personnel in the organization at an early stage (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a).

Next and importantly, the savvy experienced manager can specify opportunities for experiential training in safety so that followers can model the correct behavior, skills and attitudes of authentic leaders; followers can see for themselves who is authentic and values-driven, and who is not. In fact, the more the experienced leader can share training conditions firsthand outside the classroom and in the field, the more s/he will observe emerging leaders among those undergoing experiential training, particularly training with scalable outcomes and ambiguous challenges built in (Winn, Rozman & Dean, 2015).

Finally, an experienced manager should provide Millennials with feedback and coaching during and after confrontations; the young professional will appreciate the immediacy and intimacy. This also provides firsthand exposure to legitimate group norms, not just those of the toxic leader. The younger subordinate soon knows how the organization should be run, not how an errant toxic leader wants it run. This, in turn, builds resiliency at the personal and organizational levels (Winn, Rozman and Dean, 2015).

### **Creating Organizational & Personal Resilience Against Toxic Leadership**

What happens to the organization when invisible hazards such as toxic leadership are present? What happens to the individual? Research strongly suggests that the effects of toxic leadership create stressors that are silent, long-lasting and just as debilitating as the more common workplace hazards. Fortunately, defenses are indeed possible.

Borrowing the term from Dixon, Boland, Gaskin, et al. (2014), when leaders actively provide personal and organizational resilience to adversity, they are providing a "full mental jacket." This means developing the tools to ward off stress that comes with the destructive influence of toxic leadership. This is one way to describe resilience but let's look even closer.

The term *resilience* has come to be used to describe positive and negative reactions to disturbances in ecosystems of all kinds including personal and organizational, but also in safety and health cultures. Pecitto (2015) says:

Resilience has even become part of the national and global policies of the U.S., the UN and the European Commission. The concept of resilience has also been implemented in the area of safety and health based on the criticism of the traditional approach to OSH, which does not result in a satisfactory level of occupational safety. The concept of resilience was adopted to research OSH in different fields and thus with different approaches, such as via sociotechnical studies, the psychological and behavioral aspects of organizational resilience and the link with research on individual or family resilience and its influence on work.



Research strongly suggests that the effects of toxic leadership create stressors that are silent, long-lasting and just as debilitating as the more common workplace hazards.

Certainly, stress occurs to the individual pressed with a toxic leader, but also to the organization whose members do not know who to trust. Recall Kim's (2016) admonishment as previously noted: "Nothing undermines a leader more than backtracking or shuffling on rules or guidelines they set up for their employees." In the world of safety where personnel and property risk can range from low to extreme almost immediately, the effect on an organization by a leader who backtracks or shuffles safety rules is at first personally hazardous to the individuals who fall outside the rules, but also devastating to the organization left without a clearly values-driven culture. Won't Millennials be at most risk due to their lack of experience in how organizations work properly, much less when leaders are malignant? Morale suffers all around and everyone suffers under the dark cloud of poor leadership.

On the contrary, Reed, Midberry, Ortiz, et al. (2011), say that good organizational morale is a "force multiplier," that it "has been found to be motivating, leading to perseverance and presumably success at group tasks, especially under trying circumstances." They conclude:

Unit organizational culture, through the actions of leaders, directly affects unit performance in high-threat environments. Leaders have a responsibility and imperative to build high morale by developing their own proficiency and displaying confidence in themselves and others. A detailed knowledge of potentialities and the current mission is also critical. Individual expertise and the promotion of strong unit cohesion couples with these characteristics in the formation of high unit morale. A unit organizational culture that fosters high morale may result in high levels of unit performance in high-threat environments.

### **Building Resilience Takes Effort**

Can perceptive leaders identify and thwart stressors such as toxic leadership in the workplace? Two well-known researchers think so. First, Ness, Jablonski-Kaye, Obigt, et al. (2011), provide specific advice for Millennials working around toxic leaders. They propose coping strategies so that authentic leaders can offset the effects of stress and provide a more resilient worker:

- Educate: "Provide accurate information so team members can set up appropriate expectations and be psychologically prepared." Ness, et al. (2011), say that communication and updates reduce stress caused by the unknown (or the toxic).
- Train without interruption: "Practiced skills are less likely to be disrupted by stress. . . . Stress inoculation training using realistic situations better prepares those operating in dangerous contexts for potential stressful situations."
- Maintain unit cohesion: According to Ness, et al. (2011), when members of an organization bond, it helps them sustain

their will and commitment to each other, the organization and the mission. “Cohesive units are less susceptible to the influence of risk factors.”

- Establish a culture of catharsis: An experienced leader anticipates that individuals who have experienced traumatic events (e.g., death of a fellow team member) will be stressed and creates opportunities to purge feelings.

- Teach coping strategies: People who believe they are in control of their circumstances and their environment feel equipped to handle the stress of hazardous situations. Administrative and bureaucratic conditions can introduce feelings of helplessness. Organizations would do well to destigmatize reporting of stress, facilitate support and eliminate administrative practices that make one feel controlled by the system.

- Commitment, control and challenge: Authentic leaders should facilitate commitment by integrating people into the team, giving them a role and a sense of control to act within that role (Ness, et al., 2011).

The second researcher has studied how workers overcome stress and increase resilience of the organization and the individual. Angela Duckworth was an Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania a decade ago when she noticed that talent alone did not always predict academic success, and that, more often, persistence did. She called this combination of passion (deep interest) and persistence (effort) “grit,” and set about to test her theory.

She took her idea to the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) to predict whether a given cadet would make it through the first difficult summer known as “Beast Barracks,” where strongly gifted academic and athletic cadets are tested for up to 15 hours a day, all summer long. Of the nearly 20,000 annual applications to USMA, only 1,500 men and women are selected per year, based on extraordinarily difficult standards, plus the required nomination by a sitting Congressional member. Still, roughly 20% of plebes drop out every year at enormous expense to the institution and to the U.S. government itself, not to mention the disappointment of family members. Could Duckworth’s “grit scale” better predict first-summer success?

To her surprise, and that of USMA faculty, Duckworth’s simple grit scale predicted West Point resilience better than the long-used USMA instrument, and even better than GPA and SAT scores.

Duckworth (cited in Wood, 2016) says that grit is a “combination of passion and perseverance.”

No matter the domain, the highly successful [cadets] had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways. First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hardworking. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted. They not only had determination, they had *direction*.

With the publication of her book, Duckworth and the grit factor were off and running in the psychology literature of the last few years.

Fortunately, grit can probably be both learned and supported. Wood’s (2016) review of Duckworth’s book identifies four psychological assets needed to “grow grit from the inside out”:

In defining grit this way, Duckworth isn’t knocking the role of genius or talent. She’s simply putting it in a larger context. A genius may fail through lack of grit, whereas a non-genius might succeed through abundance of it. Indeed, her data indicates that grit is a better predictor of success than genius or talent. (The smartest and most physically able West Point

applicants did not necessarily make it through to graduation, for example.)

A crucial tenet of grit theory is that grit can be developed. And if it can be developed, then greater levels of achievement can be earned. That brings us to the second part of Duckworth’s book: how to develop grit from the inside out. These chapters focus on the psychology of the would-be achiever. Gritty people have four key “psychological assets”:

- Interest: “intrinsically enjoying what you do”;
- Practice: “the daily discipline of trying to do things better than we did yesterday”;

- Purpose: “the conviction that your work matters,” that it is “integrally connected to the well-being of others”;

- Hope: “the expectation that our efforts can improve our future.” (Wood, 2016)

Here is where the authentic leader helps protect young professionals from the effects of toxic leadership by taking advantage of new hires’ passion for the field of safety (grit factor No. 1) and helping build persistence (grit factor No. 2). It goes almost without saying that young professionals have entered safety and health as a career because they are passionate about helping other people and demonstrate nurturing even before they graduate. Let’s take advantage of this as we develop grit among them. The authentic leader will be demanding, but supportive, too. In this way, the authentic leader builds resilience and strength of character in a career in safety, but also takes advantage of passion and builds resilience and strength of character to ward off the ill effects of toxic leadership (Duckworth, 2016).

## Conclusion

Even though society seems to glamorize the idea of leadership, only recently has organizational and behavioral research focused on the negative features of “leaders gone bad.” A leader who acts in self-interest, against the values of the parent organization, or ignores work rules with no apparent theme can be called toxic. Toxic leaders work under the radar of this romanticized view of leadership, and they create stress for the organization and for its members.

The U.S. Army noticed these characteristics of toxic leaders as they endeavored to uncover reasons for high suicide rates among enlisted soldiers. Those researchers discovered that toxic leaders show morale-damaging behaviors but have even worse effects on resilience when they have conducive environments (“nobody seems to care”) and tolerant followers (young people with little experience and a penchant to please others, often a characteristic of Millennials). Millennials are entering management positions now and will comprise 75% of the workforce in less than 10 years. Still, Millennials sometimes have a somewhat naive worldview that may open them sooner to the negative effects of toxic leaders than a more experienced worker.

Resilience is a measure of a person’s or organization’s ability to bounce back after adversity, and toxic leaders surely present adverse and sometimes subtly destructive conditions. Since the rising generation of young professionals has little work experience to fall back on (built-in resilience to some degree), they probably represent a vulnerable population in the workplace where mistakes in judgment can be costly. More important, supervisors who continuously act values-congruent and do not allow bending the rules will strengthen junior subordinate personnel and the organization. Even in the face of serious stress-

ors such as a fatality or large-scale property damage, morale and resilience can rebound if the commitment is in place.

Applying the “full mental jacket” analogy, authentic leaders will help build resilience at the department level by using a model that includes establishing an overt, public set of values or an honor code; having a model to live by those values including acting decisively and being supported when they do. Supervisors will protect incoming professionals from toxic leaders and build resilience by being demanding but supportive, actively rejecting moral relativism, and offering the wisdom and stories of experienced safety leaders. Supportive leaders will soon recognize that resilience can be built, even strengthened, by building on the altruism and passion that this generation of young professionals displayed empirically and identified in earlier research. The authentic senior leader adds to the junior Millennial professional’s own passion by fostering what Duckworth calls grit.

The conversation about organizational and individual resilience will continue for another decade. The ingredients in the recipe for a values-consistent safety culture are simple elements: the time-tested honor code; the demand-much/support-much methods of handling Millennial juniors; creating passion and perseverance through grit—these give the motivated senior leader hope that stressors can be challenged head on. **PSJ**

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