RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

Toxic leadership behaviors compromise the well-being of the workforce and increase an organization's vulnerability to insider threat incidents. Senior leaders can influence change, but they may not recognize toxic behaviors or know how to deal with them. To meet this need, we designed an online guide, "Step-Up and Step-In," to help senior leaders identify, mitigate, and prevent toxic leadership behaviors in themselves and others.

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About The Threat Lab

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director's vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

"Step-Up and Step-In" — A Leader's Guide to Recognizing and Mitigating Toxic Leadership

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Introduction

Toxic behaviors persist in many organizations despite the fact that they compromise employee well-being and overall organizational health. Indeed, toxic organizational climates cause an estimated annual loss of $23.8 billion in the United States alone due to decreased productivity, reduced workplace engagement, and increased healthcare costs (Tepper et al., 2006). While toxic climates result from a number of factors, a recent study found that over half of American workers considered their boss to be mildly-to-highly toxic, and 75% considered their boss to be the primary source of their workplace stress (Abbajay, 2018).

Senior leaders have the authority to interrupt and even prevent toxic leadership within their organizations, but they may not take action for a number of reasons. For example, because of their status, senior leaders may not witness these behaviors directly. People who exhibit undesirable toxic behaviors often also possess desirable traits such as boldness and charisma, and so careful impression management may camouflage toxicity. Moreover, toxic leaders may produce desired results that benefit an organization's bottom line, despite acting to further their own self-serving goals over those of the organization (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008; Steele, 2011). For instance, toxic leaders may disregard their employees' wellbeing by requiring unreasonable and unsustainable performance standards, which likely results in short-term gains that increase a toxic leader's reputation among unsuspecting senior leaders (Bereczkei, 2018). In the long term, however, toxic leadership behaviors that senior leaders allow to persist — through inattention or inaction — increase workplace deviance and the risk of an insider threat event, inflate the cost of mitigation, and hasten organizational decline (Goldman, 2008; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Tepper et al., 2009; Whicker, 1997).

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The National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence & Security (OUSD[I&S]) asked The Threat Lab, a program within the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC), to develop a toolkit to help leaders identify, mitigate, and transform toxic leadership behaviors. To address this need, we developed an online guide, titled *"Step-Up and Step-In" – A Leader's Guide to Recognizing and Mitigating Toxic Leadership.* This illustrated guide provides concise examples of toxic leadership behaviors, summaries of their consequences, and mitigation techniques. The guide informs and provides guidance for leaders at all levels, but is particularly intended for senior leaders who have the authority and influence to effect change all levels of their organization. This Research Note summarizes the design, content, and development of this online guide.

Literature Review

We began with a review of the unclassified literature on toxic leadership. Specifically, we surveyed the literature for definitions of and behaviors associated with toxic leadership. We also reviewed the literature to identify documented effects of these behaviors on workers and on organizations. Finally, we noted the variables that influence toxic leadership and identified strategies that high-level leaders can use to address these behaviors and bring about organizational change.

Types of Toxic Leadership

Overall, toxic leaders can be defined as those leaders who, by virtue of "their *destructive behaviors* and *dysfunctional personal qualities* generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Contained within this broader group are distinct categories, or types, of toxic leadership styles and corresponding behaviors, including but not limited to, Abusive, Anti-Social, Authoritarian, Coercive, Destructive, Egocentric, Grandiose, Machiavellian, Micromanaging, Narcissistic, Passive Aggressive, Psychopathic, Rigid, Ruthless, Tyrannical, and Volatile (Ashforth, 1994; Ferguson, 2015; de Vries, 2014; Lubit, 2004; Tepper et al., 2017).

Many of these toxic leadership types overlap, and some are more common than others. To address overlap, we developed four criteria to guide the process of selecting types for inclusion in the guide:

1. The toxic leadership type must have sufficient empirical support in the peer-reviewed research literature,

2. The type must be sufficiently unique,

3. The type must not require a clinical diagnosis as part of a management strategy, and

4. The behaviors corresponding to the type must be able to be summarized concisely and accurately in an artifact designed for high-level leaders who are not necessarily subject matter experts in human behavior.

Using these criteria, we selected five toxic leadership types for inclusion in the guide: The Destroyer, The Narcissist, The Passive Aggressor, The Micromanager, and The Authoritarian.

Effects of Toxic Leadership

Although toxic leadership may result in immediate short-term gains (e.g., profit), the negative consequences often become more clear over time. Turnover increases (Tepper, 2009), and those workers who stay experience psychological distress and diminished job satisfaction (Tepper, 2007), both of which are known to contribute to counterproductive work behaviors (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Mount et al., 2006). As toxic leadership persists, the well-being of the workforce continues to deteriorate, leading to disgruntlement and burn-out (Meier & Spector, 2013). Workplace deviance escalates, leading some employees to actively retaliate through obstinance, hostility, sabotage, and the spread of disinformation (Tepper et al., 2017; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013).

Solutions for Toxic Leadership

Preventing and mitigating toxic leadership at the organizational level requires high-level leaders to leverage their authority. We reviewed the literature to identify actionable mitigation strategies for leaders to use on their own and in collaboration with others. First, leaders must take accountability for preventing and mitigating toxic leadership. They must communicate that the organization will not tolerate toxic behavior and must hold other leaders accountable for the organizational climate they create. Second, leaders need to engage others in their organization who can assist in identifying and addressing toxic leadership. This might mean onboarding an ethics ombudsperson who can investigate allegations of toxic leadership, or asking Human Resources to develop a systematic process for removing toxic leaders who refuse to change (Pelletier, 2010). Third, leaders must incentivize healthy leadership behaviors, such as organizational citizenry and other pro-social leadership values, in themselves and others (Daniel, 2006; Daniel & Metcalf, 2015; Van Rooij & Fine, 2018) and maintain focus on the long-term consequences of toxicity despite potential short-term gains (Whicker, 1997). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, leaders must lead by example, modeling the behavior they want to see both in their daily interactions (e.g., how they speak to subordinates) and in the corporate values they espouse (Lubit, 2004). Using these strategies, committed leaders who enact evidence-based solutions can build and preserve organizational health and longevity.

Design and Development of the Online Guide

High-level leaders juggle multiple priorities, so we worked to transform the literature review findings into a concise, high-impact, and easy-to-understand online guide that would motivate action. Specifically, we designed the guide to help senior leaders: 1) Recognize toxic leadership behaviors in themselves and others; 2) Understand the short-term and long-term costs of tolerating toxic leadership behaviors; and 3) Take immediate action against toxic leadership behaviors in their organization. Here we describe the process that resulted in the final guide.

Organization and Layout

The online guide is composed of seven individual web pages that introduce the topic, present the five toxic leadership styles, and offer actionable prevention and mitigation strategies. The first page, titled "The Challenge", summarizes the purpose of the guide, the target audience, and the challenges associated with identifying toxic leadership behavior. Each of the next five pages describes one of the five toxic leadership types and commonly associated behaviors. The final page, titled "The Solution: Step-up and Step-in", summarizes the consequences of toxic leadership behavior and includes a list of "Do's and Don'ts" that high-level leaders can use to immediately effect change.

Look and Feel

It is important to deliver serious content in a way that engages high-level leaders without overwhelming them or accusing them of failing to properly manage their workforce. Therefore, we designed a unique fictional character for each of the five toxic leadership types. This enabled us to organize the large amount of information into meaningful chunks to help support long-term recall (Miller, 1956) and add humor to increase accessibility. We followed best practices for web design and layout, with a focus on Section 508 compliance and content organization to reduce information processing demands (Krug, 2000).

User Feedback

A convenience sample of 14 subject matter experts (SMEs) reviewed a prototype of the guide and provided feedback on the content and usability. These SMEs included individuals with experience in human resources, organizational leadership, law, psychology, sociology, and security (including military and law enforcement).

We made a number of changes to the guide based on SME feedback. In addition to modifying the text to increase clarity, we changed some of the character illustrations to better align with the toxic leadership type and associated behaviors. We also removed any signifiers associated with traditional displays of gender (e.g., prominent eyelashes) and added details to make the characters relevant to a work setting. For example, Figure 1 presents the original draft of The Passive Aggressor followed by the amended draft that included a clipboard and "To Do" list.

Figure 1: *Before (A) and After (B) Illustration of the Passive Aggressor*

Conclusion

The illustrated guide, *"Step-Up and Step-In" – A Leader's Guide to Recognizing and Mitigating Toxic Leadership*, is publicly accessible and can be found at https://insiderthreat.westpoint.edu/partners-page/threatlab-main/toxic-leadership-behaviors. This link includes access to the guide and this Research Note. We encourage counter-insider threat and security professionals to share this link with high-level leaders, human resources professionals, and others committed to workforce protection. We hope the salient imagery and condensed content will enable leaders to review and understand the information quickly and easily, and encourage them to maintain vigilance in their efforts to identify, mitigate, and prevent toxic leadership behaviors in their organizations.

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