

Toxic leadership: A true Menace for the organization

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Abstract

Leadership is all about persuading others. Leadership entails the leader exerting influence over perception, motivation, communication, personality, and, eventually, the behaviour of others, preferably followers. Leadership is thus the study of a leader's impact over followers' thoughts, feelings, views, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. This is part of a larger theory. In practise, people frequently encounter a weird leadership style known as toxic leadership. This form of leadership is detrimental because the leader is more concerned with his or her own interests than with the goals of the organization. This approach has a negative impact on employee commitment and satisfaction, which eventually leads to high employee turnover and other HR-related challenges in the long run.. This conceptual paper seeks to learn more about toxic leadership and the personality qualities of such leaders in order to provide fresh insights for identifying and dealing with toxic leaders. The primary goal of this study is to comprehend and conceive the long-term presence of such toxic leaders in an organization. This study uses grounded theory to investigate the elements that enable toxic leaders to remain in organizations for an extended period of time. This research is conducted by dealing with persons that have toxic leadership styles. In the present context, leader refers to 'manager' at any level.

Keywords: *toxic leadership, coercion and Power*

Introduction

Leadership can be defined as “an influential power relationship in which the power of one party promotes movement/change in others”. Leadership skills can be practiced at any level like entry level, middle level, or top-level regardless of the title. They are important skills to have because a good leader can bring out the best abilities in team members and motivate them to work together to achieve a shared goal. A leader plays an important role in a team or an organization in integrating people with the organization's goals and achieving its mission.

Leadership is the process of inspiring and motivating people. Leadership as a concept has always been used synonym for positivity. Till now only a few researchers explored the dark side of leadership. Of late, this kind of leadership is found in the corporate too. There is a lack of study in this area regarding the present corporate scenario, especially in India. Hence, this study is taken up to explore the causes and consequences of toxic leadership and to draw a conceptual framework.

Research methodology

The present study followed qualitative research that began with a grounded theory which is scientific research method concerned with the generation of a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Haig,1995). To develop a conceptual framework for Toxic Leadership in Corporate Management, the researchers interacted with 60 respondents who are currently working with or previously worked with a toxic leader. All the respondents are working and/or residing in the Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states of India. A Google form (mentioning the characteristics of toxic leaders) is being distributed over social media platforms to find the people who are working currently or worked previously with a toxic boss. Having received the responses from the respondents, the telephonic unstructured interview method was used with those who are associated with toxic leaders to explore the content regarding toxic leaders.

Coercive leadership is not toxic

Leaders motivate his/her followers not only through rewarding but also through punishing. Coercive power is the opposite of reward power. Coercive power is the ability or capacity of a leader to coerce or punish his followers for carrying out the assigned tasks. The source of

coercive power include both personal and position. Leaders personally have coercive power to punish their followers. If the followers do not do the assigned work on their own, then the leader influence and coerce them. Leaders also have coercive power which is derived from their positions. The coercive power includes deferring promotions, salary reductions, demotions, transfers etc. The coercive leadership is also very good in its own place and set of conditions.

The concept of toxic leadership

Toxic leadership is entirely different from coercive leadership. Let's explore the meaning of toxic. Toxic which means 'poison'. Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker has linked the word 'Toxic' to the leadership and presented three types of leadership styles viz., trust worthy (green light), transitional (Yellow light) and the **toxic leadership** (Red light).

The Toxic leadership is a "type of leadership that is destructive to members of a team and the overall workplace. It's a selfish abuse of power on the part of the leader". A toxic leader will typically have their own self-interests at heart. This may affect a team's performance, productivity and employee morale to varying degrees.

There are a few traits of toxic leaders. Understanding traits will help to spot toxic leaders. The traits are; frequently lying, doesn't listen to feedback, arrogance, placing importance on hierarchy, discrimination among employees, self-interest, using informal ways of collecting feedback, and using the information to gain control over others.

Review of literature:

A capable leader may frequently unintentionally exhibit characteristics that cause the organisation to become dysfunctional due to unforeseen events. Toxic, on the other hand, is a more emotive term used to describe extremely unfavourable leadership practises that are deliberate (Let, facts to fulfil personal agenda. They compete with everyone they perceive as having the capacity to threaten their dominance, including potential heirs, and frequently employ divide-and-conquer tactics to incite conflict (Bloom, 2006).

Toxic leaders choose scapegoats and blame those chosen scapegoats for any activities that could backfire against them in an effort to save face.

Toxic leaders present their followers with lofty ideals, big fantasies, and unrealistic future visions. With the goal of realising these lofty ideals, the followers become completely reliant on the leader, agree with the directives, and fall prey to his or her enormity (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

According to Lipman-Blumen (2005), toxic leaders engage in activities ranging from undermining, degrading, seducing, marginalising, frightening, demoralising, disenfranchising, incapacitating, to imprisoning, torturing, terrorising, and vitiating their followers' work environments. Toxic leaders display negative actions that degrade their followers' morale, motivation, and self-esteem, as well as impose an unrealistic burden on them.

Presence of toxic leaders:

Toxic leadership is not at all uncommon. According to a 2009 survey by Kusy and Holloway, 64% of the participants believed their present supervisor was toxic. In addition, 94% of respondents admitted that they have worked with a toxic person at some point in their lives. It's obvious that certain companies are worse than others. In a 2003 study by Solfield and Salmond, 91% of nurses reported having experienced verbal abuse that made them feel humiliated.

Data analysis and conceptualization

The data collected through a telephonic interview is segregated and organized to explore the meaningful content of the data. These are the facts drawn through the interaction with the respondents.

Surprising facts about toxic leadership

Fact#1: It is very easy to think that if a leader is toxic, then the team or subordinates or even the top management no more tolerate it as it affects the whole organization in long run. But the reality is people want to build their careers and don't want to take the chance of being the first one against a toxic leader. As a result, he/she gets survived for long periods.

Fact#2: Toxic leaders are, by nature, still very charismatic and smart, So, they can hide the toxicity. These toxic behaviors are more subtle. The toxicity is only be sensed by a person but it is not eloquently done. This requires close observation of the person and also their behavior is consistent with all others. They act differently with different people.

Fact#3: Since the corporate culture is so competitive, the top management and others believe that being toxic is the need of the hour. They also believe that toxic leaders are more capable of handling competition and troubleshooting. Hence their behavior is taking it for granted.

Fact#4: Toxic leaders are not inherently bad. They may be toxic to defend their own self-doubts. This may be their survival mechanism. It is true that few toxic leaders may change their behavior in course of time.

Toxic leaders are different types

As per the data collected through interviews, toxic leaders are different types based on their toxicity and smartness.

Menace	True Leader
Defender	Free rein

Fig.1. Relationship between toxic and smartness of a leader (*source: research diagram*)

There are four categories of leaders based on toxicity and smartness as shown in fig1. However, the present research is all about the leaders, Menace, who are toxic in nature and very smart in their dealings. The other kind of toxic leader is defender who became toxic to defend in the situation. But he is not a true toxic to the people and organization. Defenders can't survive in any organization for longer time.

Cause of toxic leadership

As per the interaction with the respondents, in their perception, the following are the causes of a leader to be toxic. Their opinions and perceptions have been categorized and presented as a whole.

Many respondents opined that the basic cause of a person to be a toxic is his/her very nature. It is not the position or the situation that is making a person toxic but inherently the person is

toxic. Even he is not in a leadership role still he continues to be toxic among his peers. They don't want to let things go in their way. They always want to manipulate the surroundings. Common characteristics found among toxic leaders are ethical failure, power craving and neurosis.

The toxic leaders are mostly hoarders of information about people and things. They use all means of formal and informal sources of collecting information if necessary they appoint spy to collect information and eventually use this information to exercise tight-fisted control over subordinates. The subordinates are threatened with the information to gain control over them. Finally, they want to create a culture of fear further, the culture will continue to carry the ideology of the leader. The toxic leaders care little about integration and team building. They focus more on exercising authority. Authoritarianism is the most favorite word in their dictionary.

Consequences of toxic leadership

Consequences of toxic leaders are difficult to spot in short run in the organization. Moreover, the presence of toxic leader is wrongly perceived, by the top management or his boss, as he is bringing about order and discipline into the work culture. When job insecurity is installed in the culture, people may naturally do better at the work therefore this may increase productivity. In this case, he is seen as a strategist by the top management and he is seen as toxic to the subordinates.

The true consequences in the long run are, reduced employee satisfaction and commitment. Further this may lead to employee turnover. They seem to derive satisfaction from creating chaos and pushing other people's buttons. Either way, the toxic leaders create needless complexity, strife and worst of all stress, every now and then compelling few to participate in counterproductive acts and others surrender to conform to the unethical, malicious acts.

The physiological and psychological damage is observed to the vicinity of toxic leadership. Heavy penalties are levied at the subordinate and organization level in future. As Ross et al. Indicated that "toxic leadership takes a toll on both the mental and physical health of

employees, in addition to an increase in counterproductive work behavior, coming to work late, resignation, or transfers.”

Another important consequence of toxic leadership is not every subordinate will tolerate this behavior forever. There is a time when a subordinate fight back with the leader. This will create unrest in the organization. The same was observed in a study by Parbudyal Singh et al.,in 2012. They observed that “The abused employee’s tit-for-tat approach may persuade them to retaliate their supervisor’s exploitation through aggressive and counterproductive work behavior. It will be mediated by a distorted leader-member exchange further soaring the turnover intentions of the dejected employee”.

Why toxic leaders are retained?

This is a surprising question that Why toxic leaders are retained? As discussed earlier, the toxic leaders are very charismatic and smart in nature. They are capable of hiding their toxicity. Also they appear differently for different people. Adding to this, the productivity also may rise due to the insecurity installed in the work culture. Only victims and witnesses can sense the toxicity. Most of the respondents expressed that even they are unable to escalate to higher authorities as a grievance for so many reasons. They are, fear is the top reason that stops them to file a grievance in the organization. Another most common reason is the toxic leader harass, hurt, dominate, ill treat, threaten people but always keeps the work between the leader and subordinate. This requires understanding the difference between coercive leader and toxic leader.

Coercive leaders use coercion to get work done

Toxic leaders use work to coerce people.

The toxic leaders have personal interest of threatening and commanding people with their power. They hide all these personal interests and talk about work always. They change the modes of operandi and instruct the followers to adapt new ways of doing things these may uncomfortable to the subordinates. He frequently follow-up the progress and asks the subordinates to submit a report by keeping a short deadline cause creating work pressure. All these are revolving around the work. Hence, the subordinates are unable to escalate to the higher authorities or filing a grievance.

Conclusion

Leadership is all about influencing people to achieve the objectives of the organization. But there is always dark side of everything. This is not an exemption for the leadership. Leadership gives a person position and power to influence people. This power is misused by the toxic leaders for their personal interests. They use all means of work related attributes to exercise the authority over subordinates. For the, self interest is more important than organizational interest. But this is very difficult to spot such toxic leader as they are smart enough to hide that toxicity. There are clear consequences of this type of leadership such as lower employee commitment and loyalty further leads to high employee turnover. The toxic leaders may harm subordinate and organization physically and psychologically in long run. It is necessary for top management to keep an eye on such managers and their managerial approach and protect healthy work environment.

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