Pretending pirates: tracing the toxic trail in South Asia

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Abstract: The recent decades that launched us into the 21st century had a long list of horrendous errors, and scams, which can be traced back to decisions made by those in positions of authority, whether in the public sphere or in business. It questions the very intentions and objectives of leaders and one wonders if failures were deliberate or due to the ineffectiveness of big-headed and imprudent leaders. Toxicity in leadership has been an undercurrent in organisations, societies and nations from its inception. However, the construct failed to entice much consideration of the research fraternity. This paper endeavours to clarify the boundaries among the constructs studied within the domain of toxic leadership, discourse some obscurities about the nature of toxic leadership, make explicit some characteristics and detrimental consequences at individual and organisational level. It also attempts to trace the stimulators of toxicity and the suggestions to deal with this menace.

Keywords: toxic leadership; toxic triangle; organisational performance; stimulators of toxicity; detoxifying toxic leaders; toxic menace.


Biographical notes: Nivedita Singh is a Doctoral student in Human Resource Management at Jaypee Business School, Noida. Her research interest includes the dark side of leadership, exploring its growth, its effects and Leader-member exchange. She completed her Master in Business Administration from UP Technical University, Lucknow and BA in Economic Honour’s from BHU, Varanasi. Her research work has been published in journals of international repute and she has also presented her research papers in international conferences. With a rich and diverse experience of two years in academics and four years in corporate, her quest for wisdom makes her better suited for research.
1 Introduction

South Asian history has witnessed array of leadership errors that has led to national upheavals such as ethnic conflicts and communal violence (Tambiah, 1990), economic downturns (Chang et al., 2013), terrorism (Akhmat et al., 2014), religious fundamentalism, and intense political polarisation (Malik and Bouguetta, 2009); and organisational upheavals such as gender inequality (Strachan et al., 2015), employee turnover, predicaments at work (Snell et al., 2013), counterproductive work behaviour and abusive supervision (Wei and Si, 2013), to name a few. The growing interest in negative behaviours at a national and organisational level has led to a belief that there is a shift of the focus of leadership literature from mere effective leadership behaviours to negative sides of leadership (Wu, 2008). Although an understanding of effective leadership is imperative for developing leaders at a national level and managers and supervisors at the organisational level, it is equally important to identify the behaviours of leaders who knowingly or inadvertently inflict enduring harm on their subordinates and also have more clarity in the concrete conceptualisation of the dark side of leadership.

It is very recently that the research fraternity is gaining interest in exploring the dark side of leadership. While very few until now have diametrically attempted to understand the nature and consequences of dysfunctional leadership (Ashforth, 1994; Kellerman, 2004; Padilla et al., 2007), several papers in the popular press have brought our attention to a unique, more menacing type of dysfunctional leadership (Pelletier, 2011; Wilson-Starks, 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Macklem, 2005; Goldman, 2006; Thoroughgood et al., 2011). These studies describe a distinctive blend of detrimental attributes named as ‘toxic leadership’ because this new dimension of the leadership style has predominantly deleterious and negative consequences both for subordinates and organisations.

Despite the fact that toxic leadership has gained interest in research arena in past few years, the construct is still afflicted with some problems. There is a dearth of a comprehensive delineation of ‘toxic’ leadership from its related phenomena. Arrays of
constructs are used in literature to define the phenomenon of ‘toxic’ leading (e.g., petty tyranny, abusive supervision, personalised charismatic leadership, aversive leadership, strategic bullying, and tyrannical leadership). These problems fortify each other and encumber effectual scientific communication, the progress of pragmatic research, and accretion of knowledge about psychological processes underlying ‘toxic’ leadership. Thus, the drive for this paper is to address these paucities and to clarify the nature, process, reasons and consequences of ‘toxic’ leadership. The current paper strives to make four contributions. First, it reviews, summarises, and integrates the existing literature on toxic leadership. Second, it draws nomological distinctions among the similar constructs of destructive leadership, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, personalised charismatic leadership, strategic bullying, tyrannical leadership, and aversive leadership. Third, it presents the rationale for conceptualising and identifying toxic leadership. And, fourth, it lists a few suggestions to combat toxicity and toxic leaders for a sustainable organisation.

Before proceeding, we clarify periphery for our exploration:

• The focus is on exploring leaders’ overt acts of persuading subordinates to attain goals rather than on implicit modelling influences. While leaders may indirectly influence followers’ behaviours by serving as role models (Bandura, 1973), the study supports the view that ‘toxic for one may be a hero for another’ but that in regard to only their overt inflated aura they create. We leave the analysis of such implicit influences beyond the scope of this paper.

• Having known that the key task of an organisational leader is to be focused and also inspire the followers for attainment of organisational goals and always act towards its interest and well-being (Eisenhardt, 1989; Mumford et al., 1993), we take on the organisation and organisational members as key points of reference when assessing whether leadership is toxic. Therefore, the paper identifies and discusses the attributes underlying the categorisation of ‘toxic leader’ as observed from a subordinate ‘cognitive schema’ perspective.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the historical background by mapping the origins of the dark side of leadership. The next section defines toxic leadership, precisely and discusses the theoretical background of the same. Section 4 describes the qualities and features of toxic leader followed by Section 5 discussing the stimulators of leaders’ toxicity. Finally, Section 6 presents ways to detoxify the leaders.

2 Mapping the origins

The existence of the dark side of leadership could be traced back to the human civilisation but leadership as a concept has always been a synonym of positivity. Up to now, very scanty researches (Conger, 1990; Pelletier, 2011; Bligh et al., 2007) have really explored the dark side of leadership. The military has been the major research area for the construct until last decade. Even though this concept has been evolving, it is still indistinct. Certainly, authors do not convey an understandable picture of it and label this dark side differently: destructive (Padilla et al., 2007), bad (Kellerman, 2004), evil (Bostock, 1995), charismatic (Sankowski, 1995), narcissist (Maccoby, 2000),
Machiavellian (Bostock, 1995), leadership derailment (Tepper, 2000), aversive (Bligh et al., 2007), bullying (Hogan and Hogan, 2001), abusive (Tepper, 2000) and toxic (Lipmen-Blueman, 2005; Pelletier, 2011). The origin of the construct could be traced from the progress of research of the similar concepts of dark leadership. The Table 1 will help in taking a glance of the related concepts.

Table 1 Behavioural comparison of various types of dark leaderships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of dark leadership</th>
<th>Author who introduced</th>
<th>Perceived intent</th>
<th>Frequency / repetition</th>
<th>Physical, verbal, non-verbal behaviour</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Inclusion of outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petty Tyranny</td>
<td>Ashforth (1997)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervision</td>
<td>Tepper (2000)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive power</td>
<td>Elangovan and Lin Xie (2000)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social undermining</td>
<td>Duffy et al. (2002)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive leadership</td>
<td>Gemzøe Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV/P</td>
<td>F/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive Supervisory behaviour</td>
<td>Yagil (2005)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory abuse</td>
<td>Bamberger and Bacharach (2006)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor verbal abuse</td>
<td>Grandey et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive managerial behaviours</td>
<td>Rooney and Gottlieb (2007)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversive leadership</td>
<td>Bligh et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>V/NV</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrannical leadership</td>
<td>Johan Hauge et al. (2007)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV/P</td>
<td>F/O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despotic leadership</td>
<td>De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>V/NV/P</td>
<td>F/O</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: No; Y: Yes; V: Verbal; NV: Non-Verbal; P: Physical; O: Organisation; C: colleagues; F: follower.

Source: Schyns, J.Schilling/The leadership Quarterly 24 (2013)

Toxicity is acutely sniping. Toxic derives from Greek mythology: toxicus means ‘poison’ (House and Howell, 1992). Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker was the first to link toxicity with leadership and discussed in her research three types of leaders within workplaces: “trustworthy (green light), the transitional (yellow light), and the toxic (red light)”.
The repertoire of toxic leaders covers a broad spectrum; it more depends not on what they really are but also on how the people perceive them. For some, they might be toxic and for some a charismatic hero (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). It is quite difficult to craft differentiation between destructive leaders that are genuinely toxic, bad leaders that are not toxic but are incompetent only in managerial skills, and leaders with mental disorders and good leaders that are wicked people. The present state of research in the related concepts of dark leadership could be drawn together in the form of Figure 1. It clearly defines the boundary conditions of the construct.

Figure 1  Illustration on the research of the related constructs under gamut of toxic leadership (see online version for colours)

![Figure 1](image)

Source: From Thoroughgood et al. (2011)

3 Defining toxic leadership and theoretical background

In spite of the concept being more than a decade old and having gained amplified attention in the research arena recently, it has not been approached methodically (Goldman, 2006; Macklem, 2005). Majority of publications in this domain made a remarkable contribution in developing an understanding of the construct, yet they are deficient in empirical support for their claims. The first task for superior understanding of the construct is forming a comprehensive definition of what TL is and what it is not. For the purpose of distinction and creating a boundary around the construct of toxic leadership, definitions from five of the most frequently cited publications on this topic are represented in Table 2. This also facilitates clarity and enables the adaptation of valid measurement tools for empirically investigating it. This table also contains the common themes that these definitions position into. It is perceptible from Table 2 that each
definition incorporates unique aspects of this construct tapering too many sub-themes. This accentuates how hazy is the current state of the toxic leadership construct. Certainly, the table is not fully inclusive of all publications in the domain, but the review of the literature revealed that the authors not incorporated in Table 2 draw on one or more of these narratives.

From the definitions in Table 2, a few common themes can be drawn. First, toxic leaders are harmful, abusive and are less concerned about the well-being of their subordinates (Flynn, 1999; Wilson-Starks, 2003; Reed, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Schmidt, 2008; Mehta and Maheshwari, 2014). They belittle and bully their subordinate and compel them to sacrifice more than reasonable (Wilson-Starks, 2003). The second theme is typified by micromanaging to the extent where subordinate’s rights are subdued and cowered (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Toxic leadership is thus seen as an approach that created an environment wherein employees were rewarded for agreeing with the leader and reprimanded for challenging his/her authority (Wilson-Starks, 2003; Padilla et al., 2007). The third theme points out that toxic leader is self-promoting and narcissist. They are motivated by self-interest and blame others for their wrong doing (Reed, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Singh et al., 2017).

Padilla et al. (2007), pronounced toxic leadership as antiethical to orders and discipline and could bend the rule for the achievement of their goal. Thus, the characteristics or traits displayed by toxic leaders result in serious negative effects for their employees. Ulmer (2012) also echoed with the previous research and claimed toxic leaders as poisonous, not far from destructive or harmful. This could be framed as fourth common theme from the literature.

Much earlier Reed (2004) inquired two things in a focus group session to identify toxicity in the leader. First, does the target feel humiliated, belittled or de-energised by that person after an interpersonal exchange? Second, does the less powerful bear more wrath than more powerful? Reed named the second approach as the “kiss up and kick down tendency”, where the toxic leader is very responsible and responsive to his or her supervisor but acts miserably to subordinates.

Although the construct converges to other dark leadership styles but it has distinctive features from pre-existing bad leadership constructs. Lipman-Blumen (2005) provides a descriptive definition of toxic leadership and identifies it to be an intentional and deliberate behaviour which may or may not appears harmful in short time but have detrimental after-effects on individual and organisation in long run. Padilla et al. (2007) contend that when determining toxicity, one must evaluate the consequences, rather than the intermediate effects of the leader’s influence on the follower. Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) and Singh et al. (2017) also found it to be relevant through their studies. Thus it can be said that initial definition of the concept although defined the problem but with its overt symptoms only which were not strong enough to distinguish TL from other dark leadership constructs. It was work by Lipman-Blumen (2005) which unveiled some covert concepts prevailing in the corporate world. This revived interest and attention in the research arena for exploring again the construct of toxic leadership.

The literature review finds toxic leadership as a discrete, specific construct that does not include impaired mental health, evil intentions or simple mismanagement. The concept of toxic leadership can be interpreted as an irreplaceable set of leadership behaviours that rancorously impact the subordinate group in inevitable ways.
### Table 2: Various definitions of toxic leadership

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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td>&quot;...maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent, and even malicious. They succeeded by tearing others down...with a deep-seated but well-disguised sense of personal inadequacies. A focus on selfish values, and cleverness at deception. These leaders are very toxic indeed.&quot; (p.17)</td>
<td>&quot;...an approach that harms people - and eventually, the company as well, through the poisoning of enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy and innovative expression. Toxic leaders disseminate their poison through over control. Toxic leaders define leadership as being in control.&quot; (p.2)</td>
<td>&quot;...it is not one specific behaviour that seems toxic; it is the cumulative effect of de-motivational behaviour on unit morale and climate over time that tells the tale...three key elements of the toxic leader syndrome are 1) an apparent lack of concern for well-being or subordinates. 2) A personality or interpersonal techniques that negatively affects organisational climate. 3) A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interests.&quot; (p.67)</td>
<td>&quot;...leaders who engage in numerous destructive behaviours and who exhibits certain dysfunctional personal characteristics. To count as toxic, these behaviours and qualities of character must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organisations. The intent to harm others or to enhance the self at the expense of others distinguishes seriously toxic leaders to the careless or unintentional toxic leaders, who also cause negative effects.&quot; (p.18)</td>
<td>&quot;...narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision.&quot; (p.5)</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Abusive to subordinate</th>
<th>Controlling/stifling</th>
<th>Narcissistic</th>
<th>Dark traits</th>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>Destroy morale</th>
<th>Create negative climate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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"a series of purposeful and deliberate behaviors and acts of a leader that disrupt the effective functioning of the organization. And are intended to manoeuvre, deceive, intimidate, and humiliate others with the objective of personal gains."
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Literature reveals that toxicity in a leader is manifested in

- identifying disparaging goals and nurturing followers’ pursuit of those goals and/or
- using negative activities to muster followers to accomplish goals set by the leader.

These two manifestations of TL are independent of each other but could be used conjointly by a leader.

From literature review a working definition of Toxic Leadership could thus be ascertained as when a leader is perceived to be narcissist, self-promoting and erratic in behaviour, who by their personal dark traits and managerial incompetency purposefully indulge in derisive supervision and impervious despotic acts that not only harm the one whom they lead in short run but also gradually percolate deep into the organisations to society and nation as a whole.

This definition builds on the work of Schmidt (2008) and Singh et al. (2017) (also see Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mehta and Maheshwari, 2014). Our definition elucidate TL as a leader’s behaviour that infringes the legitimate interests of the organisation, and the purposeful harmful behaviour nested in the process of leading.

4 Behaviours and qualities of toxic leaders

Having discussed the boundary conditions and configuration of the construct of toxic leadership it is now imperative to know about the behaviours and qualities of such leaders. Although all the qualities that a dark leader has, holds true to a toxic leader as well with an exception to their duplicitous charismatic personality which shadows their ill intentions. Kellerman (2004) placed behaviour of a bad leader on a continuum ranging from ineffective/incompetent to unethical/evil.

Lubit (2004) also seconds on the destructive nature of toxic leaders. He claimed destructive narcissism as a dominant personality trait of many toxic managers. Seeger et al. (2005) recognised that such leaders are more pugnacious and least interested in mentoring and enriching followers. They enjoy controlling and subjugating and are seen insulting and abusing others. All those who come in the vicinity of these toxic behaviours and decision are affected by it. However, toxic leaders are generally indecisive unless there is a crisis. When a decision is made, it is often quick and appears to lack rationale.

Lipman-Blumen (2005) laid emphasis on the deceitful and abusive behaviours of toxic leaders. In her book, she enlisted a few qualities of toxic leaders which included arrogance, narcissism, ego, immorality, rickety ambition, reckless attitude, spinelessness, cowardice and lack of integrity. “An enormous ego blinds them to (their own) shortcomings and limits their capacity for self-renewal”.

Toxic leaders parade a variety of deviant behaviour comprising voluntary actions that infringe conventional norms and which have a detrimental effect not only on the members but also on the organisation. The followers are also encouraged to voluntarily break all the norms and sometimes even rewarded for their support (Robinson and Bennett, 1995).

The study by Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) also discussed traits like aggression, egocentrism, greed highly abusive and exploitative behaviour and lack of integrity as toxic leaders’ behaviour.
On a behavioural continuum, available literature finds TL behaviours band ranging from insignificant gestures to mental and physical harassment, and from petty larceny to fraud and unfair and misrepresentation of facts against the organisation.

Very recently, Singh et al. (2017) explored the attributes of TL in Indian perspective. The study identified eight attributes of TL namely managerial incompetency, dark personal traits, derisive supervision, and Impervious Despotlic leadership, the dearth of ethics, erratic behaviour, narcissism and self-promoting attributes which proves to be very detrimental for the followers as well as the organisation in long run.

All these behaviours and characteristics identified through various research on toxic leaders result in a culture which is ambiguous leading to stressful employees.

5 Stimulators of leader’s toxicity

While focusing on the ‘dark side’ of leaders’ behaviour it becomes utmost important to first understand what prompts the bright leaders become dark. A look into the past of toxic leaders shows that they do not develop toxic tendencies in a day, in fact, their style evolved over a period of time.

According to the Padilla et al. (2007), “negative organisational outcomes are not only the product of dysfunctional leader behaviours but also susceptible followers and the contributing environment in which they interact”. These three components were named as ‘toxic triangle’, illustrated in Figure 2. The characteristics of these components of the toxic triangle and their interaction with each other determine the severity of toxicity prevailing in the organisation.

Figure 2  Toxic triangle (see online version for colours)

The kind of followers also contributes to toxicity of a leader. A ‘colluder’ happily follows toxic leaders because of similar world-view and high ambitions whereas the ‘Conformers’ adhere to them to avoid incongruities for risk of reprisal.
As noted in previous researches, being in a position of power can affect a leader’s ability to consider other perspectives. This, together with an unimpeded personality, could make him ignorant of his own attitude and behaviour that leads to dysfunctional outcomes to those around him. A subordinate who works under dark leaders and has frequent exposure to them will easily be able to identify this ‘dark side’, which can change their perception of him and lead to an erosion of trust in this person’s leadership capabilities (Hogan et al., 1994; Hogan and Kaiser, 2005).

The mounting curiosity in the ‘dark side’ of leadership is owing to the outcomes that the ‘dark side’ meddles with the effectiveness of a leader in building and maintaining high performing teams and generating soaring bottom line for organisations. The leaders are under immense pressure and stress for a profitable transformation in their team as well as organisations. As exemplified by researchers – a dynamic environment will increase the effect of stakeholder pressures on corrupt behaviour and allow the leaders’ dark side to emerge. Lipman-Blumen (2005) thus, concluded that organisations could also become an incubator of toxic or dysfunctional behaviour by providing their own toxins, through counterproductive policies and practices, including unreasonable goals, excessive internal competition, and cultures that encourage blame game.

One of the common reasons identified for the emergence of toxic leadership is perceived a threat to the status, power and controls that may prompt toxic behaviour in vulnerable leaders to sprout. The ambition to attain power and authority could also become an addiction for some leaders. Their personal agendas gain priority over the long-term welfare of the organisation (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003). Impatient and grouchy leaders who are always on the verge of anxiety at the workplace could also breed toxicity. These leaders develop a habit of throwing temper tantrums, often erratic behaviour, shout, use abusive language, demean employees openly, and make unreasonable demands.

Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) discussed that leaders become highly toxic when they were left unquestioned by superiors or peers. The more they ascent the organisational ladder the higher is the impact of their behaviour. In such situations, they tend to take control of the workplace and become quite rigid and obstinate in their approach blinded to new ideas or suggestions from subordinates.

Thus such negative environment curbs enthusiasm, creativity, innovativeness and autonomy of the people landing up giving paramount importance only to leader’s interest.

6 Consequences of toxic leadership

An important way to look at toxicity in an organisation is to look at the impact of such leadership on the culture of the organisation. Dealing with a toxic boss results in a 48% decrease in work effort and 38% in work quality (Reed, 2004). Literature shows that the harmful effects or consequences of toxicity may or may not be prominent in short time but gradually over a period of time, it has the power to ruin the very foundation of the organisation. Lipman-Blumen (2005) described TL as charismatic leaders and claimed that the perception of toxicity is individual specific. Toxic leader for some may be a hero for another. Thus, its effects are sometimes difficult to identify and only gradually surfaces with time.
It has been established through various empirical and conceptual studies that
destructive leadership generates physical as well as psychological damage to the vicinity
it exists.

Pelletier (2011) explored the penalties of toxic leadership behaviours both at the
subordinate and organisational level. The study shows a drastic increase in the work place
deviance by employees working under toxic supervisor.

The consequences for organisation were further identified by Webster et al. (2011),
which includes reduced employee satisfaction and commitment further amplifying
employee turnover. Organisational cynicism is fuelled by toxic leaders.

A range of damaging impacts as a result of the Bad and toxic leadership have been
described, particularly at the individual employee level (Kellerman, 2004; Schmidt,
2008) and includes decreased self-esteem and self-insight which will compel them to
doubt their own abilities and low sense of self-worth. As a consequence there will be
some psychological reactions which include distrustful or sense of threat, voluntary
quitting, distress or sense of betrayal, helplessness and burnout, a sense of mistreatment
and lower motivation (Mackie, 2008; Tepper, 2000). Reed (2004) also put forward that
about 90% of all hospital visits are stress related. Research has shown that persistent
stress can lead to heart disease, cancer and other diseases and illnesses.

Yen et al. (2013) did an extensive empirical study to understand the detrimental effect
of toxic leadership behaviour. The result revealed that organisations with toxicity appear
normal externally but the inside story is full of chaos.

The feeling of helplessness, no autonomy, no opportunity for participation, job
insecurity, reduced efficiency and innovation, lower job satisfaction, psychic and
emotional problems such as anxiety, depression and frustration are the effects of toxic
leader’s behaviour (Ashforth, 1994). This was further examined by Kusy and Holloway
(2009) and found that employees whose self-esteem is neglected display low self-
confidence leading to drop in individual performance. Abused employees may
reciprocate their supervisor’s mistreatment by engaging in aggressive behaviour to
retaliate directly against their abusive supervisor (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

As a consequence of working under toxic leaders, employees are left with only two
options either obey or perish. Leaving lead to higher turnover ensuing high cost for
recruitment and training of new employees. This leads to high economic issues for the
organisation. Those who remain are either conformers or colluders (Padilla et al., 2007)
who might not be loyal and committed.

Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) also in their study agreed that toxic leadership affects
both at organisational and individual levels. The similar outcome of reduced
organisational performance, counterproductive work behaviour and higher turnover were
confirmed as detrimental for organisation.

This perceived toxicity of leader makes employees feel cynical and frustrated, leading
to decreased energy, enthusiasm, and self-esteem (Zangaro et al., 2009).

Black (2015) recently in his research concluded – ‘the experience of a toxic
leadership is an institutional cancer with the high-propensity to metastasise, leaving
destruction, poison, and scars in its path and beyond’. It was established that the
influence of toxic leadership is damaging far beyond the subordinates, organisation,
project goal, it penetrates deep into the society and nation as a whole (Lipman-Blumen,
2005).
7 Common myths about toxic behaviour

The review of the literature and practical experience may now be able to clarify some corporate myths about the toxic leaders. A few of the myths common people have about them and their negation are listed as below.

Myth 1: We would make out if there is someone toxic in our team.

No, these people are quite charismatic and funny and proficient in masking the toxicity for their advantage. Thus, it’s not easy to make out from their overt behaviour.

Myth 2: We cannot get rid of these people, they are profit makers.

Yes, we can. Although toxic leader’s need for recognition, power, and self-promotion initially leads to faster growth in organisation and encouragement by top management but, later it starts affecting the bottom line and good employee start leaving the organisation. This is because; leaders low in interpersonal traits, in turn, affects the performance of the team.

Myth 3: If their behaviour continues immoral and ruthless, subordinates would not accommodate with them.

Yes, they will anyhow put-up with bad leaders, because followers are driven by their pragmatic needs and lack courage and insecurity. They get attracted by the charisma of toxic leaders who generally display high levels of energy and are able to get challenging things done and overcome the obstacles with effortless ease.

Myth 4: Bad leaders cannot be dealt individually.

Yes, they cannot be. Joint efforts from both management and subordinates are required to counter such problem. First systems approach and then individual approach will be effective in handling toxic leaders from contaminating the organisation.

Myth 5: A toxic person is a prerequisite to deal with another toxic manager.

Not necessary. Reed said. “We seem to have a band of tolerance for certain leadership styles that are not positively impacting our organisation, and that could be the crux of the problem”. A senior manager could point out and discuss the toxic behaviour with them and make them realise because it’s challenging for them to self-realise their mistakes.

8 Detoxifying the leaders

The content and literature discussed up to now in the paper leave no clue to guesstimate the severity of the toxic behaviour to the employee and organisation. To combat toxic leadership, organisations need to first come to standings with and accept that it exists and that there could be a problem from within. “Once the light is shined on it, people can begin to talk about it. No one wants the badge of toxic leader” (Reed, 2004).

Early identification in the initial phase of a leader’s career also shrunkages the probability of building severe toxic behaviours Prevention is better than cure and if diagnosed at right time the treatment becomes easier.
Toxicity in a leader could be best judged and identified by the subordinate working closely with that leader. Thus the behaviours and performance of leaders need to be monitored and assessed by the executive mentors working with leaders to ensure that they engage in interactions with followers which results in a healthy work environment. Also, open and easy access to complain and whistle blowing should be encouraged for any wrong doing in the organisation. Once toxic leadership behaviours have been exposed, recognised and appropriate action taken within the organisation, such lessons learned can become an integral part of the selection or promotion process for future leaders.

Lipman-Blumen (2005) had suggested with enriched organisational and personal policy selections in order to escape the risk of bearing the brunt of toxic leadership. Personal options require keeping oneself cool, distillate oneself from the contaminated environment and concentrate in their work, creating a coalition and circumventing solo confrontations.

It is advisable for the guardians of the organisation to formulate checks and controls for timely identification of toxic leadership behaviours within the organisation as it provides them the ample time to intervene and assist in reorienting deviant leaders. This could be as early as at the time of recruitment. Personality and aptitude assessment can be conducted along with technical test which can at least give an idea about the personality shade of the interviewee. This could save organisation from future catastrophes. An aspect at performance appraisal needs to be scanned as well (Reed, 2004).

In the situation when a good performer gradually comes under the risk of developing toxic traits then it’s high alert for HR and authority to check for flaws in the policy made and its implementations. History is bursting with examples of organisation perishing to their aggressive and recursive policies that concentrate only on the upsurge of the bottom line. It prompted leaders to become toxic and yield profit, as in corporate scams like those of Enron, Lehman Brothers, Bear Sterns and WorldCom. Developing economy like India too has not an exception to corporate and government project catastrophes like that of Satyam computers Services Ltd and Common Wealth Games, Coalgate scams to name just a few.

An interpersonal and technical skill development training programs may curb the risk up to certain extent. The HR managers and guardians of the firm should try to counter the components of ‘toxic triangle’ itself. Only fixing toxic leaders is not often an option. Perhaps a strong group of key opinion-shapers within the organisation should confront and counsel them. Proper verbal and strict written warnings to the nuisance creators should be raised from the appropriate authorities on time.

In case organisations do not have mechanisms to monitor toxic leadership behaviours, they can seek professional intervention by external counselors for helping the victims and also reeducating the deviant leaders. Even after multiple warnings, the behaviour has not changed, HR must decide what to do. If the person has skills useful to the company and is a good worker, you may consider transferring him out of a managerial position but keeping him at the company. Some people just do not work well with others but may blossom when working in a narrower sphere of interaction. The last option available with an organisation, after the intervention and follow-up period, is to offer for the safe exit of the leaders responsible for spreading toxicity.

Once you’ve addressed your current toxic managers, you have to make sure more do not spring up in future. To begin with, make sure job descriptions include treating employees in a gracious and appropriate manner. Clearly, define the behaviours that
would not be tolerated, and hold them accountable for a turnover. Vigilant monitoring and effective policies can alone eliminate a huge percentage of the risk of toxicity development in an organisation.

9 Conclusion and implications

To conclude, without an iota of doubt, toxic leadership is enormously treacherous not only to individuals that bear the brunt of it but also to the sustainability of the affected organisation. Individuals displaying the traces of toxicity in their personality and presence of dysfunctional behaviours should not be permissible to function and grow in an organisation under any state of affairs. It is therefore rational to design/develop and implement specific methods and mechanism to identify, control and even eliminate toxic leadership behaviour before it becomes the new culture of the organisation. This paper endeavoured to make a few contributions in the concept of toxic leadership. As per the four contributions listed in the beginning of the paper, firstly, we have intricately reviewed, summarised and integrated the literature on toxic leadership. Secondly, we have attempted to resolve the issue of construct overlap; sharpen the dimensions of the concept giving it a clearer meaning and an operational definition. Thirdly, we have presented a strong and robust rationale of toxic leadership and have explained various stimulators and myths regarding toxicity in leadership. And lastly, our clear-cut identification of toxicity in leaders and suggestions to prevent the same will reduce the chance of such destructive behaviour.

As pointed by Einarsen et al. (2003) negative events in social interactions have a stronger effect than do positive events. Hence, understanding and preventing toxic leadership may be as important or even more important, than understanding and enhancing positive aspects of leadership. The most evident implication of our paper is that as toxic leadership is related to decreased employee loyalty, commitment, job performance and job satisfaction, substantial efforts should be made to condense the prospect of such destructive behaviours (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). It indeed is an expensive anomaly as it incapacitates individuals, groups and organisations, even nations. In order to strengthen nations of our continent with progressing organisations and dedicated employees, this crucial problem of such detrimental leadership should be addressed with the highest perseverance.

References


Pretending pirates: tracing the toxic trail in South Asia


**Bibliography**

