

## Toxic Leadership in the Military

By

Anthony L. Hinen, University of South Florida

In over 40 years in the workplace, I have witnessed creativity, communication and innovation stifled because of toxic leadership. My experience was in the military, my primary research was with the military, and my goal is to better understand toxic leadership to inform potential mitigation techniques for the military. This research may also be generalizable to non-military organizations as suggested by a preliminary study that included university professors.

My research suggests toxic leadership exists because senior leaders, those leaders above the toxic leader, allow it to exist, either unwittingly or knowingly. Furthermore, non-toxic

leaders can create toxic environments by their inaction or inability to make timely decisions. That inaction allows problems to develop, then fester and ultimately, creates a toxic environment.

Also, non-toxic leaders can create toxic environments by not dealing with incompetent subordinates, like the senior leader who allows a toxic leader to continue to act out toxic behaviors. Incompetent subordinates generate problems that can contribute to a toxic environment due to

their technical shortcomings or low EQ (emotional quotient). The most effective mitigation is confronting and reporting toxic leader behaviors when they occur.

**Toxic leadership involves leadership styles that poison the employee, the organization, or both.**

**This paper captures a common phenomenon for toxic leadership (symptoms) useful for diagnosing or addressing toxic leadership in military organizations.**

**Keywords:** Abusive, Behavior, Control, Destructive, Organizational behavior, Toxic leadership.

## Prologue

*My hotline rang loudly, breaking the silence in my office and my concentration as I worked on a performance evaluation for one of my pilots. I quickly answered, "Yes Sir." My boss fired back, "Did you authorize Exon 14 to takeoff?" "Yes Sir," I responded. He shouted angrily, "That's what I thought!" as he slammed his phone down. "Now what," I wondered silently as I got up from my desk, grabbed my 'commander's book' with the flying schedule and select regulations, and walked out of my office. I told Judy, my secretary, that I was headed to the Colonel's office.*

*As I entered the lobby of the Operations Group headquarters, the deputy quietly greeted me with, "Tony, I'm glad you came over; the boss is pissed"—a polite way of saying he was 'pissed' at me. I walked up and stood just outside the Colonel's open door waiting for him to waved me in. He stood up from behind his desk as I walked into his office so that he could look me in the eye. Then, he asked, "Why did you direct Exon 14 to takeoff?" I started to explain, "The IP (instructor pilot) had a pressurization problem so he landed at...." Visibly angered, the Colonel cut me off, "I know that—you weren't authorized to approve his takeoff; why didn't you call me?"*

*"Sir, I am authorized," I replied. "No, you're not—damn it!" The Colonel retorted as he picked up an open binder containing his reference regulations and pointed to a paragraph that said only the Operations Group Commander could authorize the takeoff of a jet that made an unscheduled stop for maintenance. I opened my binder to the same paragraph and showed him where it stated the Squadron Commander is the approval authority. Instinctively, the Colonel flipped to the cover page to check the date. I followed suit; the Colonel's regulation was out of date. Obviously upset, he said loudly, "You're dismissed." As I walked out of his office, I heard him yelling into his phone, chastising a fellow Squadron Commander for not keeping his regulations current. I made a mental note to call Dennis when I returned to my office and apologize for the "chewing out" he received.*

## Problem

Unfortunately, examples of abusive leadership are far too common and, unlike my experience in the prologue, can be extreme. See Appendix for a redacted witness statement that is extreme and graphic but demonstrates toxic leadership at its worst.

In over 40 years in the workplace, I have witnessed creativity, communication and innovation stifled because of poisonous leadership. My experience was in the military and my primary study was with the military. The goal of this research is to understand toxic leadership at the individual level in order to better inform potential toxic leader mitigation techniques for military organizations. This research may

also be generalizable to non-military organizations as suggested by a preliminary study that included two university professors (discussed in the research "Protocol" section).

The term "toxic leadership"—coined in 1996 (Green, 2014)—is a relatively new focus area in the crowded organizational leadership field. Generally, no accepted definition exists for "toxic leadership;" however, Boddy and Croft (2016) provide a good working description:

*Toxic leaders are those who embody dysfunctional characteristics, exhibit destructive behavior and so generate a poisonous effect on the organizations and individuals they lead.*

This definition is striking because of the medical euphemism of something that poisons the body. In other words, toxic leadership poisons and potentially sickens or even kills the organization where it exists. I use this definition for this study.

Surprisingly, one study shows toxic leadership is more prevalent than previously believed. This subset of organizational leadership revolves around leadership styles that poison the employee or the organization. The toxic leadership common phenomenon produced by this study can be used to develop mitigation strategies useful to both organizations and individuals. For example, this study can inform potential antidotes to prevent its development and effectively deal with the problem if it arises. My research focused on answering the following questions:

1. How is toxic leadership manifested in the military at the individual level?
2. How do subordinates respond to toxic leadership at the individual level?

## Review of Research

The literature on toxic leadership reveals several interesting points. First, there are many different definitions. Some definitions merely highlight bad leadership in general. Second, toxic leadership is more common than one would think. One study suggests the percentage of leaders in the U.S. Army may be as high as 30 percent (Erickson, et al., 2015). Third, several studies reveal toxic leadership can generate physical effects on employees, like high blood pressure, alcoholism, and increased absenteeism for medical reasons. In turn, these effects contribute to decreased employee performance and higher overall costs, in lost productivity and higher health care. (Gallus, et al., 2017; Webster, Brough, & Daly, 2016; Yavaş, 2016) Fourth, toxic leadership poisons the organization. It negatively impacts employee morale, creativity, productivity, cohesiveness, and overall performance, which leads to high employee turnover that contributes to higher recruiting and training costs. Finally, in its worst case, toxic leader-

## Methodology

### Preliminary Study

I conducted a preliminary study to solidify the qualitative, phenomenological processes I would use in my primary research. I accomplished three telephone interviews with one military and two academic individuals. In the preliminary study, I captured participant encounters with toxic leaders to practice the distilling of their individual lived experiences into a common phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Each of my three participants were affected deeply by their experience with a toxic leader. For Participant 1, his experience lasted six months during a temporary duty assignment where he worked 2,300 miles away from his home. He is a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States military and has worn the uniform for 34 years. My interview with him lasted 32 minutes. Participant 2 experienced a toxic leader for three years out of 28 years with his place of employment. He is in his seventies and a tenured professor at a large university. My interview with him ran 51 minutes. Participant 3 worked for a toxic leader for her first three years in her organization. She is Asian (English is her second language) and a relatively new, non-tenured professor at a large U.S. university. My interview with her lasted 31 minutes.

As a result of the preliminary study, I scaled my research focus from toxic leadership in general to toxic leadership in the military. I framed the primary study using the Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al., 2007) to better organize the interview data and build on Padilla's work. This study also validated my research processes and better prepared me for my primary study.

### Primary Study

I used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to capture individual experiences that describe the essence of toxic leadership as lived by each individual I interviewed (Creswell, 2018). I utilized a semi-structured interview process with 10 formal questions to guide these discussions. My interview questions were designed to free participants to discuss their experiences with "good" and "bad" leaders. Interviews ranged from 28 to 69 minutes and averaged 46 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted in-person where possible or via the phone and recorded with a digital recorder.

Data analysis was accomplished using the *In Vivo* coding process to divide the data into categories or themes using modified versions of the participants' words as the category descriptors (themes). The coding process was informed by the Toxic Triangle framework. This analysis led to a toxic leadership common phenomenon grounded in the interview data (Saldana, 2016).

### Sample Size

I conducted 15 interviews; that number was determined when I reached saturation of information—the point where I began to hear the same information and was no longer learning anything new (Seidman, 2013). According to Seidman, the theoretical minimum is 10. Again, the purpose of my interviews was to capture participant experiences in order to distill their individual lived experiences into a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2018, p. 75). The interviews totaled 694 minutes, nearly 12 hours, and when transcribed, produced 117,260 words across 270 pages (single spaced).

### Study Population Inclusion Criteria

I selected participants who were active duty, retired military, or Department of Defense (DOD) civilians with at least 15 years of total service, either all military or military/DOD civilian combined. Potential candidates who did not meet these criteria were excluded, which ensured my participants had a depth of experience and maturity to provide meaningful data relevant to this study. I selected 15 interview candidates randomly from colleagues known by my associates or me; some participants recommended another person or persons to interview. I conducted interviews in-person or via the phone at locations and times convenient to participants. Subjects were not required to participate and could terminate the interview at any time without repercussion.

### Demographics

The 15 participants represented all military services—U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Navy. They included active duty and reserve component members (guard and reserve). Also, one third of the participants had transitioned to Department of Defense (DOD) government civil service positions, which gave them an additional perspective as a DOD civilian. Participants included 11 current or former commissioned field grade officers and four former non-commissioned officers (NCOs)—12 males and three females.

### Terminology

**Field grade officers** are senior to company grade officers but junior to general officers; they generally correspond to the ranks of major (O4), lieutenant colonel (O5), and colonel (O6).

**NCOs (E4-E6)** are subordinate to both senior NCOs (E7-E9) and commissioned officers.

**GS12 through GS15** roughly equate to the military's field grade officer ranks and civilian middle management.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics (AD = Active Duty, GR = Guard/Reserve)**

Interview #	Gender	Race	Service	Status	Military Grade	Civil Service Grade
1	M	White	AF	GR	O5	
2	M	White	Army	AD	O5	
3	M	White	Army	GR	O5	
4	M	White	Navy	AD	E7	
5	M	White	Army	AD	O5	
6	M	White	AF	AD	E7	GS15
7	F	Hispanic	AF	AD	E5	GS13
8	M	Black	AF	AD	O4	
9	F	White	AF	AD	O5	
10	M	White	AF	GR	E9	GS12
11	M	White	AF	GR	O6	
12	M	Black	USMC	GR	O6	
13	M	White	AF	GR	O5	
14	F	Black	AF	AD	O6	GS14
15	M	White	AF	GR	O5	GS13

ship can lead to employees sabotaging organizational goals, leading to the company's demise (Boddy, 2013) and (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013)\£.

Several studies propose potential antidotes to prevent or mitigate the effects of toxic leadership. These antidotes include screening out future toxic leaders during the hiring process (Boddy, 2013), training (Edwards et al., 2015), early identification by management (Erickson et al., 2015), and the use of 360-degree feedback (Mueller, 2013), which is anonymous feedback provided to the leader by his or her boss, peers, and subordinates.

During my literature review, I discovered a useful conceptual framework described as the "Toxic Triangle" (Figure 1) that consists of *destructive leaders*, *susceptible followers*, and *conducive environments*; together, they enable abusive leadership.

The Toxic Triangle framework is oriented towards destructive leadership at the nation-state level or large multi-national corporate leadership, where each of the three domains plays a significant role in



**Figure 1, The Toxic Triangle [adapted from (Padilla et al., 2007)]**

enabling destructive leadership. Some of the domain sub-components do not translate well to the tactical level, which is the focus of this study. Nevertheless, the three domains provide a useful framework around which to organize my research data.

## Findings

The interview data produced 518 toxic leader references that were assigned to one or more of 50 individual codes. Again, data analysis was accomplished using the *In Vivo* coding process to divide the data into categories or themes using modified versions of the participant's words as the category descriptors (themes) (Saldana, 2016). These codes were further organized into one of eight themes or sub-themes. The Environment theme had 2-levels of sub-themes while the Follower Reaction, Leader Style, and Leader Temperament each had 1-level of sub-themes. This division was necessary because the Environment theme was more diverse and had a broader range of themes.

## Themes (codes)

Table 2 summarizes the definitions used to classify the 518 toxic leadership references to a specific theme and/or sub-theme (code). Table 3 summarizes the data sources for each of the major themes.

In Table 3 the "Data Source" column identifies which interviews sourced the associated code. The "Files" columns show the number and percentage, respectfully, of interview files that include this code. The "Reference" columns identify how many times this code was referenced (coded) across all the interview files and what percentage of the total codes it represents.

## Environment

The Environment theme is defined as the setting or conditions in which leadership is exercised. It addresses both research questions: 1. How is Toxic Leadership manifested in the military at the individual level? And 2. How do these victims respond to toxic leadership at the individual level? Data in this

**Table 2: Code Definitions**

Theme / Code	Description
<b>Environment</b>	<b>The setting or conditions in which leadership is exercised.</b>
Command Climate	Accepted behaviors established by the commander.
Communication	How information is exchanged between the leader & follower.
Hostile	Communication using threats.
Kills Messenger	The deliverer of bad news is "attacked" regardless of their role in the news.
Liar	The leader is intentionally untruthful in his or her communication.
No Guidance	The leader provides no guidance when the situation warrants it.
Screamer	The leader raises his or her voice in anger when communicating.
Withhold Info	The leader withholds information the follower needs.
Senior Leaders	The leader's leader.
Unit Impact	The effect the leader has on the organization's performance.
Demotivates	Followers accomplish the minimum required work and no more.
People Hurt	Followers' career impacted negatively.
Performance -	Unit performance declined.
Performance +	Unit performance improved.
Transference	Subordinate leaders adopt the leader's negative behaviors.
<b>Follower Reaction</b>	<b>Follower response to the leader's negative behavior.</b>
Complain	Follower files formal complaint.



Theme / Code	Description
Confront	Follower deals directly with leader.
Demotivated	Follower is less eager to work.
Effects - Physical & Emotional	Negative physical and psychological effects manifested in the follower.
Fear	Follower anxiety over potential loss of their job or worse.
Inappropriate	Follower responding in an unsuitable or improper manner.
Quit	Follower quits their job or relocates to a different leader.
Uncomfortable	Follower is uneasy or distressed.
<b>Leader Style</b>	<b>How the leader leads.</b>
Blindsided	Follower is caught unprepared or attacked from an unexpected position.
Bushido-like	Leader demands unquestioning loyalty and obedience.
Incompetence	Leader does not have the technical skills required.
Indecisive	Leader can't or won't make a decision.
Isolate	Follower is separated from others by the leader.
Moral Failures	Wrong or bad behavior that is not necessarily illicit.
Uncaring	Leader has no concern for his or her followers.
<b>Leader Temperament</b>	<b>The leader's nature with respect to their permanent behavior.</b>
Demoralizing	Follower loses confidence or hope.
Disrespect	Leader acts in an insulting way to followers.
Megalomania	Leader's obsession with the exercise of power & dominating followers.
Narcissist	Leader who has excessive self-interest or admiration of him/herself.
Passive-Aggressive	Leader uses indirect aggression toward a follower.
Perfectionist	Leader expects flawless products/behavior from followers.
Pins & Needles	Follower is nervously anxious.
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>How to deal with a toxic leader.</b>
Be Flexible	Creative response to leader demand.
Communicate	Talk to leader in a non-confrontational way.
Confront	Stand-up/defend yourself when "attacked" so dealing with it cannot be avoided.
Defuse	Reduce the tension in a difficult situation.
Document	Record information about negative events when they occur.
Don't Internalize	Don't accept an opinion or belief so that it becomes part of your character.
File Complaint	File a formal complaint in writing, for example, to the Inspector General.
Focus on the Mission	Don't take it personally; focus the negative energy on accomplishing the mission.
Learn from It	"Make lemonade out of your lemons."

Theme / Code	Description
Seek to Understand	Try to understand why the leader is acting the way he or she is.
Support System	Develop a support system (family, friends, church) to deal with the toxic leader.
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b>Things that don't fit in the above categories</b>
Why	Participants view on "why" the leader was toxic.
Good Leader Traits	Participants view on what makes a good leader.
Academy Grad	Is the toxic leader a Military Academy graduate?
Interview Impact	How the interview impacted the participant.

**Table 3: Code Summary**

Code	Data Source (file ID)	Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
<b>Environment</b>	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,13,14,15	14	93%	138	27%
<b>Follower Reaction</b>	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,14,15	13	87%	69	13%
<b>Leader Style</b>	1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,14,15	13	87%	71	14%
<b>Leader Temperament</b>	1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15	14	93%	103	20%
<b>Recommendations</b>	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15	15	100%	96	19%
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,14	13	87%	41	8%

theme was pulled from 14 of the 15 interviews (93%) and represents 27% of the total toxic leadership references in the data. It includes Command Climate (7% of the total references), Communication (9%), Senior Leaders (3%), and Unit Impact (8%). The Communication theme is further divided into subthemes that are self-evident: Hostile, Kills Messenger, Liar, No Guidance, Screamer, and Withhold Info. Command Climate is defined as accepted behaviors established by the commander. Communication is defined as how information is exchanged between the leader and follower. Senior Leader is defined as the leader's leader. Unit Impact is defined as the effect the leader has on the organization's performance. The Unit Impact is further divided into subthemes: Demotivates, People Hurt, Performance-Minus, Performance-Plus, and Transference (subordinate leaders adopt the leader's negative behaviors).

"Environment" exemplar: *The rest of it's all just mostly the guy screaming at the top of his lungs, kicking people out of his office, throwing things...those kind of things. Just complete tantrums from a, you know, 40-something-year-old senior officer in the United States Army.* (Interview 5)

### Follower Reaction

The Follower Reaction theme is defined as follower response to the leader's negative behavior. It directly addresses research question 2: How do these victims respond to toxic leadership at the individual level? Data in this theme was pulled from 13 of the 15 in-

terviews (87%) and represents 13% of the total toxic leadership references in the data. It includes Complain (<1%), Confront (1%), Demotivated (3%), Effects—Physical & Emotional (3%), Fear (3%), Inappropriate (1%), Quit (2%), and Uncomfortable (1%). Complain is defined as follower files a formal complaint. Confront is defined as follower deals directly with the leader. Demotivated is defined as follower is less eager to work. Effects—Physical & Emotional is defined as negative physical and psychological effects manifested in the follower. Fear is defined as follower anxiety over potential loss of the job or worse. Inappropriate is defined as follower responds in an unsuitable or improper manner. Quit is defined as follower quits the job or relocates to another leader. Uncomfortable is defined as follower is uneasy or distressed.

"Follower Reaction" exemplar: *Some of my younger...folks in the office said, they quit, and they never came back. They thought it's not worth it. Their stress and their.... [Did they quit the civil service, or just quit their job?] Yes. They quit civil service altogether.* (Interview 7)

### Leader Style

The Leader Style theme is defined as how the leader leads. It directly addresses research question 1: How is Toxic Leadership manifested in the military at the individual level? Data in this theme was pulled from 13 of the 15 interviews (87%) and represents 14% of the total toxic leadership references in the data. It in-

cludes Blindsided (1%), Bushido-like (1%), Incompetence (4%), Indecisive (2%), Isolate (3%), Moral Failures (1%), and Uncaring (2%). Blindsided is defined as follower is caught unprepared or attacked from an unexpected position. Bushido-like is defined as leader demands unquestioning loyalty and obedience. Incompetence is defined as leader does not have the technical skills required. Indecisive is defined as leader cannot or will not make a decision. Isolate is defined as follower is separated from others by the leader. Moral Failure is defined as wrong or bad behavior that is not necessarily elicit. Uncaring is defined as leader has no concern for his or her followers.

“Leader Style” exemplar: ... *finally, I’m at the point where...I feel compelled, the [adversary’s] reconnaissance plane is gonna be close enough now, I feel compelled to go brief the actual captain of the ship. And so...I went in and...briefed the captain. It’s now two hours later, our division officer shows up. As soon as he stepped in the door, [I said] “Sir, this is the action that’s going on, these are the processes...I followed to notify everyone in the chain of command. I looked for you, I couldn’t find you.” He just pauses and looks at me and, you know, this is mission support, it’s direct operations, he stops what I’m telling him, and he looks at me and he goes, “Petty Officer, why does the passageway look like garbage?” I said, “Well sir, I’m in here working, I don’t know what the other guys are doing, but this is what I’m focused on,” and he says, “Well somebody needs to go fix the passageways.” “Yes sir.” So, in the middle of an operation, I shut down our early warning system that was providing us the information of where this reconnaissance aircraft was, just turned it off cold and went out and started stripping and waxing the passageways. So, to me that was just a clear...I don’t know where his head was at, I, for the life of me I’ve spent the rest of my career trying to grasp what he was trying to achieve and what was on his mind that took his focus away from the mission?* (Interview 4)

## Leader Temperament

The Leader Temperament theme is defined as the leader’s nature with respect to their permanent behavior. It directly addresses research question 1: How is Toxic Leadership manifested in the military at the individual level? Data in this theme was pulled from 14 of the 15 interviews (93%) and represents 20% of the total toxic leadership references in the data. It includes Demoralizing (2%), Disrespect (2%), Megalomania (4%), Narcissist (7%), Passive-Aggressive (2%), Perfectionist (1%), and Pins & Needles (2%). Demoralizing is defined as the follower loses confidence or hope. Disrespect is defined as the leader acts in an insulting way to followers. Megalomania is defined as the leader’s obsession with the exercise of power and dominating followers. Narcissist is de-

finied as the leader who has excessive self-interest or admiration of himself or herself. Passive-Aggressive is defined as the leader uses indirect aggression toward a follower. Perfectionist is defined as the leader expects flawless products or behavior from followers. Pins & Needles is defined as the follower is nervously anxious.

“Leader Temperament” exemplar: *Lack of respect for their people. I mean, people weren’t positive contributors, they were just tools in the tool belt. And...you use them until you wear them out, then you get rid of them.* (Interview 1)

## Analysis

To better appreciate the relationships between only the domains in the Toxic Triangle, the Leader Style and Leader Temperament themes were combined and the % Ref. values for the three Toxic Triangle domains were normalized. To normalize the data, all toxic leadership references not in a Toxic Triangle domain were removed by subtracting all the references in both the Recommendations and Miscellaneous themes. The normalized summaries of the three Toxic Triangle domains are shown in Table 4. Based on the interview participants’ reflections, the most impactful domains in decreasing order are the Leader at 46%, the Environment at 36%, and Followers at 18%.

**Table 4: Normalized Domain Summaries**

Normalized Environment			
Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
14	93%	138	36%

  

Normalized Follower Reaction			
Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
13	87%	69	18%

  

Normalized Combined Leader			
Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
14	93%	174	46%

## Discussion

The data suggests that toxic leaders tend to be toxic regardless of their environment. The setting or conditions in which the toxic leader operated in, did not affect the level of his or her toxicity. This appears counter-intuitive but requires further investigation to explain why. The low score for the Follower domain can be explained by the idea that people rarely blame themselves for their leader’s toxic behavior, and only one participant hinted that toxic leadership might be needed in special circumstances where the unit is performing horribly. By far, the data shows that toxic leadership is a result of the leader’s leader-



ship style and temperament. From this data analysis, a toxic leadership common phenomenon was developed and aligned with the Toxic Triangle.

### Common Phenomenon

The toxic leadership common phenomena identified in this study are grouped under the three Toxic Triangle domains of Leader, Environment, and Follower originally developed by Padilla (Padilla et al., 2007).

The Leader common phenomena are summarized as a narcissistic megalomaniac, an extremely self-centered, domineering, power obsessed leader. I subjectively organized all the leader phenomena (codes) under either the narcissist theme or the megalomania theme to better represent this summary. I based this ordering of codes off the knowledge I gained during this study. See Table 5 for the results.

Other explanations: Steele notes that toxic leaders usually are not incompetent or ineffective but are often strong leaders who have “the right stuff” but the wrong intensity and wrong desired end-state (self-promotion) (Steele, 2011). Although Incompetence scored relatively high, there were several examples in the data where the toxic leader was described as very competent. Also, one participant felt a particular leader was not toxic, yet the leader created a toxic environment through his indecisiveness. In other words, the leader’s inability to make timely decisions allowed problems to fester to the point where the organization became less effective (Interview 15). Also, it was observed that the leader’s

**Table 5: Leader Phenomena**

Leader	14	93%	174	33%
	Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
<b>Narcissist</b>	10	67%	37	7%
Incompetence	09	60%	22	4%
Passive-Aggressive	06	40%	09	2%
Uncaring	05	33%	08	2%
Indecisive	06	40%	08	2%
Moral Failures	03	20%	06	1%
<b>Sub-Total</b>			<b>90</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Megalomania</b>	09	60%	21	4%
Isolate	06	40%	15	3%
Demoralizing	07	47%	11	2%
Disrespect	06	40%	11	2%
Pins & Needles	04	27%	10	2%
Blindsided	03	20%	06	1%
Bushido-like	05	33%	06	1%
Perfectionist	02	13%	04	1%
<b>Sub-Total</b>			<b>84</b>	<b>16%</b>

**Table 6: Environment Phenomena**

Environment	Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
	14	93%	138	26%
<b>Communication</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>9%</b>
Hostile	9	60%	18	3%
No Guidance	5	33%	8	2%
Kills Messenger	3	20%	7	1%
Screamer	5	33%	6	1%
Withhold Info	3	20%	4	1%
Liar	2	13%	3	1%
<b>Unit Impact</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>7%</b>
Performance -	9	60%	19	4%
Demotivates	3	20%	8	2%
Performance +	4	27%	5	1%
People Hurt	3	20%	4	1%
Transference	3	20%	3	1%
<b>Command Climate</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Senior Leaders</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>3%</b>

inability or unwillingness to remove incompatible workers can create a toxic environment (Interview 7). This idea was validated by one participant’s experience (Interview 14).

The Environment common phenomena are summarized best as the setting or conditions where the toxic leader’s behavior or allows the leader’s toxic behaviors to continue. Table 6 illustrates this area by the relatively low Senior Leader score as compared to the Communication, Unit Impact, and Command Climate themes. The low score is further reinforced by the Follower phenomena of not confronting or reporting the toxic leader. Thus, the Senior Leader unwittingly or knowingly enabled the leader’s toxic behaviors.

While the toxic leader’s leader enabled the toxic environment, the toxic leader’s communication style and command climate—accepted behaviors established by the commander—created the toxic environment. The communication style and command climate are best described as hostile.

The Follower common phenomena are best summarized as subordinates who are unwilling to confront the toxic leader or unwilling or unable to file a formal complaint. This unwillingness or inability allows the toxic leader’s behaviors to continue since neither the toxic leader is aware of the impact he/she is having on personnel, nor do the leader’s leader learn of the toxic conditions in the subordinate organization. This reality is demonstrated by the relatively low Reference scores for the Confront and Complain codes from the data. In one case, confronting the toxic leader directly resulted in the leader examin-

**Table 7: Follower Phenomena**

Follower	Files	% Files	Ref.	% Ref.
	13	87%	69	13%
Effects - Physical & Emotional	08	53%	16	3%
Demotivated	06	40%	13	2%
Fear	06	40%	13	2%
Quit	06	40%	11	2%
Uncomfortable	04	27%	06	1%
Inappropriate	05	33%	05	1%
Confront	03	20%	03	1%
Complain	02	13%	02	0%

ing his leadership style and changing it for the better (Interview 6). The Follower phenomena are rank ordered in the Table 7.

The remaining Follower codes describe reactions to the toxic leader but generally had no effect on the toxic leader. For example, the suicide reported in Interview 2 did not change the toxic leader's behavior.

## Conclusions

The data from my research is inconclusive regarding why some military leaders exhibit toxic behaviors, but it suggests what enables them. Toxic leadership exists because the senior leaders, those leaders above the toxic leader, allow it to exist, either unwittingly or knowingly. In some cases, the senior leader allowed the toxic behaviors to continue because the toxic leader delivered successful results to the larger organization. In other cases, the senior leader did not believe the reports on the toxic leader or felt the follower was overly sensitive—in this situation, the senior leader often had a positive personal relationship with the toxic leader. However, in the majority of cases, the senior leader was unaware of the toxic behaviors within their organization. An unexpected surprise was the finding that non-toxic leaders can create toxic environments by their inaction or inability to make timely decisions. That inaction allows problems to develop, then fester and ultimately, creates a toxic environment. Also, non-toxic leaders can create toxic environments by not dealing with incompetent subordinates, like the senior leader who allows a toxic leader to continue to act out toxic behaviors. Incompetent subordinates generate problems that can contribute to a toxic environment due to their technical shortcomings or low EQ (emotional quotient).

With respect to the environment, in the military, it is understood that the commander establishes the environment and provides the resources for the organization to accomplish its mission. Consequently, if toxic behaviors exist in an organization, then

every senior leader in the chain of command is responsible. The military understands this and takes a top down approach to deal with the problem of toxic leadership. For example, the United States Army added a definition of toxic leadership to their regulations in 2017; it includes the following: "These leaders are also usually bright and energetic, as well as goal-oriented and boss-focused. Capable of producing spectacular short-term results, but are arrogant, abusive, intemperate, distrusting, and irascible. They are typically distrusting micro-managers never burdened by introspection" (Army Chief of Staff, 2017).

Concerning followers, the most effective mitigation techniques to address the problem of toxic leadership is confronting and reporting toxic leader behaviors when they occur. In the military, confronting and reporting can be difficult because of the rank structure, the power and authority granted to commanders, and the self-sacrifice and loyalty expected from subordinates. Consequently, the fear of retribution resulting in the end of one's career or the ability to advance one's career is present. Also, there is the understanding that the current environment is temporary since either the toxic leader or the suffering subordinate will eventually rotate to a new assignment. Together, these factors form a powerful deterrent to confronting or reporting the toxic behaviors. The military is addressing this fear of reporting through its professional military education programs.

Finally, one related topic lacking in the literature is a discussion of the potential benefits of toxic behavior vice a toxic leader. My experience has shown that toxic behavior can positively affect organizational performance in the short term. This is a leader who can inject toxicity into a situation to change the health of an organization. Following the medical euphemism, a vaccine injects a small amount of poison into the body, so the body can develop its own immunity from the toxin. Likewise, a dose of toxic behavior may help an individual or organization.

To illustrate, I was in the commanding general's headquarters talking to his executive officer in an outer office about 75 feet from the general's desk. The general was a rare charismatic general who had the ability to inspire tremendous loyalty from his airmen; he certainly had mine. As I looked out of the exec's office into the hallway, I saw a young airman in his Service Dress uniform (coat and tie) being escorted by his first sergeant to the general's secretary. Moments later, I heard the general uncharacteristically shouting at the airman that he could have killed his wife because he decided to drive his car back to the base from a local bar while intoxicated. He yelled so loudly I could understand clearly what was being said though I was in an office 75 feet from the general's office. The general's diatribe went on for what seemed like an eternity. I had never seen this side of the general before but was convinced that

airman would never again think about driving after having a drink. I have heard the saying, “put the fear of God in him;” well, that is what the general did with respect to this airman’s drinking and driving. The general created a significant emotional event for the airman that he would never forget.

Although I found virtually no evidence to support this view in my interviews, the idea of using toxic behavior in a controlled setting for a specific purpose is an area worthy of future investigation. Lastly, this research can inform future investigations into potential individual and organizational antidotes for toxic leadership in non-military organizations.

## Summary

Creativity, communication and innovation are stifled in military organizations because of toxic leadership. This subset of organizational leadership studies revolves around leadership styles that poison the employee, the organization, or both. This study captured a common phenomenon (symptoms) for toxic leadership useful for diagnosing or addressing toxic

leadership in military organizations. To summarize the common phenomenon: 1) A toxic leader is a narcissistic megalomaniac, an extremely self-centered, domineering, power obsessed leader; 2) personnel operate in a toxic leader enabling environment because senior leaders are unaware of the toxic leader’s behavior or allow that behavior to continue; and 3) followers are unwilling or unable to confront or report the toxic leader.

## Epilogue

*Dennis was a talented squadron commander who was so negatively impacted by this particularly toxic leader that he left the Air Force shortly after his command tour ended. And he wasn’t alone. I’m aware of at least one other squadron commander from that wing who left the Air Force early and two more who decided to leave the executive track they were on to become full-time Air Force pilots with no organizational leadership responsibilities—a role normally filled by much junior pilots.*

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## Review

This article was accepted under the **constructive peer review** option. For further details, see the descriptions at:

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## Author



**Anthony L. Hinen** is the Principal Cyberspace & Strategic Advisor at The MITRE Corporation in Tampa, Florida where he supports both U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command. He's a retired Air Force colonel and former Wing Commander. He earned a B.S. in History from the U.S. Air Force Academy, a M.S. in Systems Management from the University of Southern California, a Master's Degree in Strategic Studies at Air University in Montgomery, Alabama and a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) from the University of South Florida's Muma College of Business in 2019.



# Appendix—Redacted Witness Statement (BG Bowen, 2018)

<b>SWORN STATEMENT</b> <small>For use of this form, see AR 190-45; the proponent agency is PMG.</small>			
<b>PRIVACY ACT STATEMENT</b> <b>AUTHORITY:</b> Title 10, USC Section 301; Title 5, USC Section 2951; E.O. 9397 Social Security Number (SSN). <b>PRINCIPAL PURPOSE:</b> To document potential criminal activity involving the U.S. Army, and to allow Army officials to maintain discipline, law and order through investigation of complaints and incidents. <b>ROUTINE USES:</b> Information provided may be further disclosed to federal, state, local, and foreign government law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, courts, child protective services, victims, witnesses, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Office of Personnel Management. Information provided may be used for determinations regarding judicial or non-judicial punishment, other administrative disciplinary actions, security clearances, recruitment, retention, placement, and other personnel actions. <b>DISCLOSURE:</b> Disclosure of your SSN and other information is voluntary.			
1. LOCATION (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC	2. DATE (YYYYMMDD) 20180124	3. TIME 1041	4. FILE NUMBER
5. LAST NAME, FIRST NAME, MIDDLE NAME (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC	6. SSN (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC	7. GRADE/STATUS (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC	
8. ORGANIZATION OR ADDRESS (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC			
9. I, (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC, WANT TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT UNDER OATH: <p>On 19 Jan 18 at 1200 PST, I participated in a telecon interview with BG Bowen (USSTRATCOM DJ3) regarding an Army 15-6 investigation of COL Kathryn Spletstoser. I was assigned to the USSTRATCOM Commander's Action Group as (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC from (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC and reported to COL Spletstoser in her position as CAG Director. BG Bowen asked a series of questions during the telecon interview, my statement will reflect the questions and my answers to the best of my recollection. 1) What was the command climate in the CAG? COL Spletstoser was restructuring and reorganizing the CAG when she interviewed and hired me into the (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC position. As part of the reorganization, for example...the Legislative Affairs element was moved into J82, the speechwriter position turned over and the new speechwriters were moved into CAG spaces, several personnel were deliberately moved out of the organization and others who were slated to be moved out (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC (b)(6),(7) remained in CAG spaces. Several new members were hired into the CAG...myself included. As an overall scene-setter, this situation and these factors caused tension in the CAG. The command climate was bi-polar and toxic at times. Throughout the day there were interactions with COL S that were normal and routine...eg. good morning, looks like rain in the forecast. During the same day, COL S might have an aneurysm if, for example, the latest draft of a trip book was coordinated with the front office without her review or if the SECDEF weekly email didn't include some key piece of information that only she knew from a meeting Gen Hyten had in D.C. When COL S was in the office (she traveled on every TDY with the commander) it would not be uncommon for her to have multiple episodes of yelling, expletive-laden outbursts at the CAG staff over some administrative or seemingly trivial matter. I would expect her to go mental on a daily basis and I made it my responsibility to keep those outbursts confined to her office or the SCIF to limit the exposure to the CAG staff or any passers-by in the hallway. Gen Hyten described his redlines during his first commander's call and highlighted to his staff the imperative of treating all members of USSTRATCOM with dignity and respect. I started to record instances in my journal where COL S went beyond her normal inappropriate outbursts. I wanted to record certain events in preparation for a one-on-one confrontation with COL S regarding her behavior and failing to treat others with dignity and respect. I spoke to (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC and confided in (b)(6) discussing at length about COL S crossing Gen Hyten's redlines and how to manage the situation while preserving the staff's dedication to supporting Gen Hyten. I did not discuss the command climate or the situation with other members of the CAG to preserve solidarity with COL S in carrying out her directives and supporting her decisions. 2) Characterize COL Spletstoser's leadership style. COL S has extraordinary talent and experience. She told me when I was hired that she wanted me to lead the CAG - administratively day-to-day, processes, task management, personnel accountability + care and feeding (reports, I.V, decorations, Civilian appraisals. I was also the (b)(6),(b)(7)(C) with other directorates and (b)(6),(b)(7)(C) USSC at all meetings that were not chaired by GEN Hyten except for the USSTRATCOM CUB (I was the (b)(6),(b)(7)(C) USSC. She attended key events with the 4-star during his duty day and all travel events. I provide that context because the CAG was only a shop of 10 people...we were a cohesive team eager to support Gen Hyten. When she engaged the staff, COL S's leadership style was to belligerently order you to get something done and threaten a consequence if timelines aren't met. For example, "Get me a fucking</p>			
10. EXHIBIT	11. INITIALS OF PERSON MAKING STATEMENT (b)(6),(7)(C) USSC	PAGE 1 OF 3 PAGES	
ADDITIONAL PAGES MUST CONTAIN THE HEADING "STATEMENT OF _____ TAKEN AT _____ DATED _____ THE BOTTOM OF EACH ADDITIONAL PAGE MUST BEAR THE INITIALS OF THE PERSON MAKING THE STATEMENT, AND PAGE NUMBER MUST BE INDICATED.			

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USE THIS PAGE IF NEEDED. IF THIS PAGE IS NOT NEEDED, PLEASE PROCEED TO FINAL PAGE OF THIS FORM.		
STATEMENT OF <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span>	TAKEN AT _____	DATED <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">20180124</span>
<p>9. STATEMENT (Continued)</p> <p>strawman agenda for this trip to Barksdale at the end of the month...I want that shit today. What the fuck do you fucking do all day...it's not like you are fucking working? Don't give me some hot-mess bullshit <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> agenda either, this is staff work 101, Jesus Christ none of you know what you are doing. You can't accomplish basic shit, the most basic fucking tasks. No one fucking leaves until I get that strawman today...I should bring your asses in on the weekend because you don't do shit during the week. If you show the draft strawman to anyone in the front office before I see it, I'll have your ass." COL S storms out of the office, CAG staff says...we had the strawman for the Barksdale trip done 4 days ago and coordinated through the front office, we haven't pushed it to COL S because we are 3.5 weeks out. Her leadership style was comical/ridiculous, outrageous/inappropriate, surreal as I could not believe it was happening as daily events unfolded. Talent and experience notwithstanding, her applied leadership style was the worst I've witnessed in my <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> years of service. 3) Did I witness bullying or unprofessional behavior? During my telecon interview, I said no, but I'd like to share another incident that describes bullying behavior. After a COL S finished her routine outburst with the speechwriter, COL S observed a smile on my face three desks away. She asked my why I was smiling, and in an attempt to lighten the mood in the office, I answered with a quote from Buddy the Elf, "Smiling is my favorite"...that drew laughter in the CAG. She asked if I thought this was funny...."Do you think this is fucking funny?" She then yelled..."I ASKED YOU IF YOU THINK THIS IS FUCKING FUNNY?" I answered, tragically...yes. She lost it...screamed that I follow her to the hallway..."get the fuck up and take you ass outside...now!" She continued, how dare you...are you fucking serious? Get out here!" I followed her to the hallway and she turns around and says (calmly)..."sometimes you just need to light motherfuckers up", she poked my chest with her finger turned around and walked away down the hall. I'm still not sure what that meant...she had those outbursts several times a day, so it didn't feel special, except it was directed at me. 4) Did the CAG work environment affect other areas of the staff or directorates? YES. We worked hard to remedy and repair relationships with Legislative Affairs <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> after repeated negative interactions with COL S. Similarly, we struggled to keep strong ties with J53 international engagements, Public Affairs, Protocol, Office of the Chief of Staff, and the Front Office. There was definitely a tension between <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> and COL S that affected the working relationship between the CAG and the Front Office. This friction potentially started over <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> desire to accompany Gen Hyten on a specific TDY, but COL S was the self-proclaimed authority on who would/would not attend trips with the CC and also who would be manifested on the CC's aircraft. On 21 Apr, the CAG held a staff meeting that was chaired by COL S...she described the transition period in the CAG to address the low morale and difficulty recruiting talent, but most importantly, she discussed new ROE with the front office due to their "inefficiencies and dysfunction." She directed "any interaction with the front office before COL S can coordinate is FORBIDDEN." During Gen Hyten's congressional testimony session, <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> held a CAG/Front Office VTC to discuss schedule, travel, read aheads status, etc. The meeting was scheduled during the actual testimony that COL S was attending, and the CAG was watching live. I attended the meeting/VTC with <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> as directed by the executive officer. COL S went mental. She directed me to not attend any meetings with the front office without her consent etc, don't talk to <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> or <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span>. COL S described any interaction with the Front Office would "blindsided" her and was not allowed. We were ORDERED not to go direct to the front office with anything. This was challenging because any request from the exec was in support of the commander. All trip books and drafts MUST be coordinated with COL S before going to the Front Office for a pre-vector - this was to adjust the agenda, meeting attendees, flight manifest, etc to suit COL S desires. Suffice to say, our collective relationships with other directorates and offices were affected by COL S's interactions with those personnel, and her guidance and directives to the CAG when dealing with the front office. 5) Did COL S manipulate TDY travel for her own benefit? COL S traveled exclusively with Gen Hyten. She insisted on accompanying him on EVERY TDY without exception. During my hiring interview, I asked COL S about opportunities to accompany Gen Hyten on specific <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> related TDYs where my expertise and presence may be useful as the CAG representative. <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> visit, <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> etc. She indicated that she would consider me for a trip (no guarantees) and she would always travel on every D.C trip. I wasn't allowed on any TDYs with Gen Hyten, my responsibility was to <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> COL S would control the aircraft manifest and seating arrangement on every flight. She would routinely bump GOs on the flight to commercial travel if there was a space issue on the jet. 6) Did she comply with staff processes? Generally speaking, COL S prided herself on working outside of staff processes, the rules did not apply to the special status of the CAG director...unimpeded access to the commander, her ability to monitor his electronic correspondence, control of the calendar + meeting attendees, access and edit over RAH's and products for the commander gave her an exceptional sense of power. Behind the scenes, the CAG was still working TMT staff processes, scheduling Big Rocks and calendar synch, etc. 7) Do you have concerns of reprisal? No, <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> CAG and Gen Hyten signed a superb performance report. I was matched <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span> COL S certainly threatened bad paperwork to members of the CAG (including me). Before I departed, she specifically threatened me with a sub-par performance report when she suspected disloyalty to her as the director in favor of the Front Office. I reminded her that we all work for Gen Hyten on the same team...together with the front office. No one was being disloyal to anyone. As you can imagine, my comments weren't received well...COL S had a verbal meltdown. When I interviewed officers for CAG</p>		
INITIALS OF PERSON MAKING STATEMENT <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 20px;">(b)(6),(7)(C) USSC</span>		PAGE <u>2</u> OF <u>3</u> PAGES

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