

### What Is A Toxic Leader?

A vast percentage of leadership books in both the secular and religious domains deal with how to move from average to good or good to great in your own leadership, or how to help other people on your team do just that. The same analysis holds true in periodical literature, both journals and magazines. That's why Jean Lipman-Blumen's book hit the market with a crash in 2004. The title alone suggests, one could say, an "alluring" analysis of something we have swept into the corner and refused to look at: *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them*.

Defective Christian leaders rarely get their pictures in *Time* or *Newsweek* for defrauding employees or driving their ministries into bankruptcy, but make no mistake about it, we have toxic leaders in our midst. Lipman-Blumen wonders why people follow such leaders and decides they do so because of a desire for dependence, a need to play a more crucial role in the organization, and just plain fear.

In strong prose, she reminds us that "fixing" toxic leaders is not often an option. Perhaps a strong group of key opinion-shapers within the organization should *confront and counsel them*. She also suggests quietly working *to undermine the leader* or perhaps even joining with others to overtly *overthrow the leader*. I have serious doubts that the latter two would advance any Christian organization. What allows abused leaders to survive, sometimes even thrive? There

must be a “buffering sufferer” who takes the sting from the top and softens it for those below. Middle management leaders can protect their people and make it possible for them to effectively carry out their work undeterred by storms at the top.

But that stop-gap solution might not always work. We must understand the biblical and spiritual consequences of toxic leadership and attempt to at least cut the percentage of toxic leaders in the ranks of evangelical ministries. That’s what this book can do. But first we have to begin with an understanding of the concept of toxic leadership. To be sure, toxic leaders are better described than defined, but *toxicity* is a clear term in the English language and I believe we can make the necessary crossover from the field of medicine to our understanding of leadership. So let me introduce my expert, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* published by the good folks at Houghton Mifflin Company with offices in Boston and New York (3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

The adjective *toxic* means “of, relating to, or caused by a toxin or other poison: . . . capable of causing injury or death.” The word comes from the late Latin *toxicus* and from the Greek *toxikon*, both meaning poison. The noun *toxicity* simply means “the quality or condition of being toxic.” The noun *toxin* describes “a poisonous substance, especially a protein, produced by living cells or organisms, capable of causing disease when introduced into the body tissues but often also capable of inducing neutralizing antibodies or antitoxins” (1,895). We could go on, but you get the idea. Toxic often appears in connection with snake venom, alcohol, or fallout in the environment from the mishandling of heavy metals such as lead, or solvents such as carbon tetrachloride.

### **Characteristics of a Toxic Leader**

I have already mentioned a few of these above in my brief allusion to the work of Lipman-Blumen but the list of characteristics seems almost longer than we can treat. Furthermore, the complex blend of these personality traits in toxic leaders renders it impossible to pinpoint the exact problem through which the leader injects poison into the organization. The best we can do is acknowledge the presence of a toxic leader, then make an attempt to deal with it in whatever way possible to us at the time. So let me list ten qualities commonly found in toxic leaders in one or more blends, and then deal with each one separately in its own chapter. By the way, I intend no severity growing or declining throughout this list. These are separate entities, each one no less or no more dangerous to ministry than the others.

### **The Deceptive Leader**

For this character trait we need no long sessions of debate or discussion; Scripture provides the perfect example in the third patriarch, Jacob. Surprised? The very fact that some readers thought I would start listing people like Hitler, Mussolini, Mao TseTung, or Saddam Hussein indicates already that we have the wrong concept of toxicity. A person with toxins in his or her body does not necessarily feel those toxins nor know their origin. If you have just been bitten by a Copperhead and you can clearly identify the snake to medical authorities, there is no guessing involved. But if you just go home night after night with a migraine headache and no physical cause can be found, you might be working for a toxic leader and, sometimes, the toxicity might be deception.

### **The Autocratic Leader**

Leaders given to total control of an organization, micro-managers, dictators, operate that way largely because they have an overly-developed ambition, or perhaps an inappropriate or inordinate ambition. This might be the most common kind of toxic leader in Christian

organizations because they can hide behind the authority of ordination, office, or even a particular interpretation of Scripture. They warn you and other members of the staff not to “touch the Lord’s anointed” lest God bring some destructive horror into your life.

### **The Egotistic Leader**

Those familiar with the literature on leadership studies know that virtually every expert indicates leaders must have some touch of ego in order to take the point position and hold it through sun and storm. But let’s not confuse pride of workmanship with flat out arrogance.

### **The Incompetent Leader**

People in a subordinate relationship find it most difficult to harbor the nagging thought that the boss might not know as much about their jobs as they do. I’ve spent a good part of my life working with students who graduated and enter assistant or associate positions in churches and other organizations. In some cases they walk into ideal learning situations in which a veteran pastor full of wisdom can help them through the rocky early years. In others however, they sign on with a church cursed by a leadership vacuum in which there exists a “Judges-like atmosphere”, people doing that which seems right in their own eyes.

### **The Ignorant Leader**

A fine line exists between *incompetence* and *ignorance*. An incompetent leader simply does not know what to do. The ignorant leader simply does not know anything about leadership. He might be a walking encyclopedia in other areas, but incapable of understanding a specific arena of leadership. That explains why many faculty cannot function as administrators.

### **The Cruel Leader**

As indicated earlier, our minds immediately dance to this tune when we think about a word as nasty as *toxicity* in relation to Christian leaders. But thousands of people have seen cruel

leaders in operation and still suffer the effects. I never fell into the curse of working for a cruel leader, but I did live with a cruel father during the earliest years of my life, so I have some personal sense of this disease.

### **The Evil Leader**

Some leaders simply lack integrity and authenticity regardless of their titles. Have we not seen world renowned pastors and television evangelists fall into adultery or theft with some regularity over the last several decades? Furthermore, evil leaders frequently come by their positions circuitously or even violently so their followers operate in fear right from the beginning. We'll have to take a close look at this one.

### **The Demanding Leader**

Almost all autocrats or cruel leaders are demanding, but not every demanding leader practices either cruel or autocratic leadership. In this chapter we will focus on the so-called "perfectionists" who cannot stand errors in their own lives and ministries and therefore will not tolerate them in others. To be sure, one can more easily work with this person than some of the others, but the toxicity that emanates from such an environment destroys the team spirit we all want to develop in our organizations. Teams thrive on shared commitment. Without it, people perform as individuals; with it, they become a powerful unit of collective performance.

In every effective team, the members genuinely agree to become accountable with and to their teammates. The dynamic that keeps arising here notes that a working group depends on the performance of individuals, but an effective team is always worth more than the sum of its parts. Leaders who foster team development in the right place at the right time prime their organizations for top performance. As Katzenbach and Smith once wrote in the *Harvard*

*Business Review*, “The difference between teams that perform and other groups that don’t is a subject to which most of us pay far too little attention”.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Reckless Leader**

I’m tempted to say here that one can spot reckless leaders most clearly by laziness, but we know of many other forms of recklessness. We all find it difficult to serve lazy leaders if we are aggressive and eager to get the job done. But recklessness or carelessness can introduce toxicity to any organization. Titus learned this first hand about two thousand years ago and we can profit from his experience.

### **Why Would People Work For A Toxic Leader?**

With the stench of the Enron disaster still in our nostrils, we have become accustomed to the ongoing lawsuits from employees who lost everything. Let’s remember that most of the people who left Enron didn’t drop out or voluntarily go to other businesses. They actually loved their jobs and felt they functioned at the center of action in such a gigantic corporation. But clearly toxic leadership ruled at Enron, so why did people stay?

### **Belief in the Unbelievable**

The old wisdom says when something looks too good to be true it probably is. Stock portfolios, retirement packages, working conditions—everything seemed right and most of Enron’s people felt they were functioning in one of the greatest companies ever built. That’s why pastors are less likely to leave a large church than a small one. However, a large organization affords part of the draw for an autocratic toxic leader who needs full command until someone blows the whistle.

### **Following the Illusion**

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<sup>1</sup> Katzenbach, Jon and Douglas K. Smith, 162.

Leaders too smart to believe in the unbelievable might fail to analyze the descriptions and analyses that toxic leaders communicate to their people. Toxic leaders may not be as harmless as doves, but they are often as smart as serpents. They create illusions of achievement and great hope for the future “If you just stick with me.” We are, after all, an idol-worshipping people who glorify their heroes and heap riches upon them; why wouldn’t we follow a leader in charge of some great business or ministry?

### **Desire for Dependence**

Some may recognize Lipman-Blumen’s words. When asked why people follow or work for a toxic leader, she talks first about the *myth of independence* which still permeates a country that lost its independence to bureaucracy some time during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The colonial patriots whose iron will and willingness to die for what they believed has given way to a shabby antinomian society willing to put up with the worst kind of immorality as long as they themselves are protected, fed and cared for.

### **Fear**

Again, one of Lipman-Blumen’s answers when asked why people would work for a toxic leader. In one interview she refers to Harold Geneen of IT&T where employees were so frightened of the boss they became physically ill and couldn’t sleep for nights before they needed to report to him. Toxic leaders do not dispel such fear, they encourage it.

### **No Other Options**

Sometimes we simply cannot find a way out. That applies to people in ministry as well as people in business organizations. A single mom without a college degree may be required to hold on to her secretarial job even though the boss behaves like a monster. We will have to deal with this seemingly hopeless dilemma before the book ends.

## How Toxic Leaders Create Toxic Organizations

Definitions loom important here, and fortunately, not difficult to identify. Robert Bacal defines toxic organizations in a useful three category model: “We can think of organizations as falling on a continuum. One end is anchored by organizations that function well. In the middle we find the average organization that is effective but could be better. Finally we have the toxic organization, an organization that is largely ineffective, but is also destructive to its employees and leaders.”<sup>2</sup>

Bacal gets much more specific when he begins to identify the characteristics that mark a toxic organization as different from a healthy organization. For example, a toxic organization has a history of poor performance—*it does not fulfill its mission, it does not achieve its goals, it does not do what it claims it will do.*

Leading the parade to poor performance we usually find ineffective decision-making. I’ve often told doctoral students in leadership classes that an analysis of decision-making has become my primary way to analyze an organization, company or ministry. A team-centered ministry will immediately display genuine group decision-making as opposed to advisory groups who say what they wish and then leave the decision to a single leader. This remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of effective leadership.

We also recognize a toxic organization by its high levels of dissatisfaction and stress. These result from destructive human relations not unlike the relationships we see in dysfunctional families. People get discouraged, good people leave the organization, but somehow, things just don’t seem to improve. So we can specify so far that toxic organizations are:

- Helpless in making things better

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<sup>2</sup> Bacal, “Welcome to the Fire of an Unhealthy Workplace,” 1

- Not supportive emotionally or professionally
- Unable to identify the causes of the discomfort and pain
- Unable to leave the situation permanently and unable to solve problems permanently
  - Consistently under attack<sup>3</sup>
  - We have already noted that a toxic organization does not fulfill its mission, so we should go on to say that it has virtually no capacity to handle serious problem-solving. Its whole climate militates against the kind of relationships essential for handling problems—poor communication, bad decision-making, and manipulative, self-centered leaders.

Bacal gets even more specific. The toxic organization is most often a relatively small work unit where there is considerable face-to-face interaction among the work unit members. This is because inter-personal relationships stand at the core of the sick organization. If there is a low level of interaction, it is likely that a toxic organization will emerge.<sup>4</sup>

At the top of this pyramid are managers who tend to be cold and distant, sometimes deliberately so. Toxic managers avoid people and situations that may require explanation of their decisions or behavior. Whether or not she knows why she behaves as she does, the toxic manager confuses subordinates, thereby reducing the trust level and increasing the fear of punishment or failure.

Dan Chenoweth talks about the possibility of turning the situation around, obviously the intent of this entire book. One positive result of such a process is that the entire organization is impacted when anyone in a leadership role becomes humble and open to core changes. If you are the person that spotted the bully behavior and took action toward intervention, you may feel an

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<sup>3</sup> Bacal, “Welcome to the Fire of an Unhealthy Workplace,” 2

<sup>4</sup> Bacal, “Welcome to the Fire of an Unhealthy Workplace,”

incredible personal sense of reward. You may see yourself as a key player in the evolution of the human spirit of your company, and in its advancement toward a more sustainable ‘human’ culture that truly values learning, cooperation, and collaboration. Handing leadership development ‘crutches’ to a ‘broken’ leader can be the greatest gift you could ever give to that individual—and to your entire organization.<sup>5</sup>

### **Stopping Toxic Leaders**

Chenoweth has already given us a great start on this but let’s take the point just a bit further. Since toxic leaders thrive on the vulnerability of poor and ignorant people; they create fantasies and illusions which seem to the people who follow them as reality. Stagnation and mediocrity characterize their organizations and leadership, in the best sense of the word, is virtually invisible. Vincent L. Ferguson in his article “Stopping Toxic Leaders” reworks Lipman-Blumen’s advice. As we seek the leadership capacity in ourselves, we should work edaciously at strengthening our democratic institutions. We must, suggests Ms. Lipman-Blumen, throw out the passive obedience role to which the toxic leaders have assigned us, patiently avoiding directives. We, after all, were made to be thinking, feeling beings with varying leadership capacities, which are not meant to be hidden under a basket. Organizational society can only become stronger and more vibrant when we try to pursue our potential as our Creator intended.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chenoweth, “Five Characteristics That Differentiate Great Leaders from Toxic Leaders”

<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, “Stopping Toxic Leaders,” 2