

TOXIC LEADERSHIP

By Steven R. (Randy) Watt

There are plenty of small-minded men who, in times of peace, excel in detail, are inexorable in matters of equipment and drill, and perpetually interfere with the work of their subordinates... They thus acquire an unmerited reputation and render their service a burden, but they, above all, do mischief in preventing the development of individuality and in retarding the advancement of independent and capable spirits. When [crisis] arises, the small minds, worn out by attention to trifles, are incapable of effort, and fail miserably. So goes the world.

Archduke Albert (1559 –1621)

We have all encountered at least one of those leaders of whom Albert speaks. Every organization has, or has had, leaders in key positions who are well thought of by those above them in the organizational hierarchy, while being despised by those whom they lead. They are insulated from the effects of their failures and their support from above makes them seemingly bullet-proof. Much as a snail leaves a trail of slime, their toxicity to the organization leaves a track, easily visible to those in the line, but often invisible to those higher in the chain of command until a failed critical incident response occurs. Unfortunately, that is often much too late.

Merriam-Webster.com defines *toxic* as "... containing or being poisonous material especially when capable of causing death or serious debilitation...; extremely

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harsh, malicious, or harmful.” It follows, then, that the term *toxic leader* is reserved for the worst kind of leader, the one whose impact on the organization is potentially so detrimental that failure to have identified it constitutes negligence on the part of higher levels of leadership. “Knew or should have known” is a term that equates to high dollar figures in litigation. If toxic leadership is so visible to subordinates, and, eventually, to higher leaders or attorneys, why can’t such leaders recognize it in themselves?

Much as a skunk is incapable of being offended by its own odor, the toxic leader is unable to self-identify as being the source of the problem. It has been my experience that these leaders (this term being only a label for the purpose of this article and not a comment on their actual ability) see themselves as great leaders. Because of the

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nature of the people they supervise, the unit is often successful in spite of the leader, not as a result of their self-identified leadership skills. As a result, the toxic leader identifies the success as his or hers, since toxicity is not gender dependent. When someone eventually identifies and points out his or her actual inability in leadership, the toxic leader is shocked, surprised and often dismissive of the truth. The reason? They just can't recognize toxic leadership.

In an effort to help them recognize their toxicity, and possibly prevent an organizational disaster, I have developed a list of some “tells” by which toxic leaders may self-identify. Although not all-inclusive, these signature actions are often reported during investigations into negative unit performance and so are worth noting. With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, the list follows.

You may be a toxic leader if:

- You are more worried about your next assignment or promotion than you are about the safety of your subordinates during an imminent action.

- You find yourself yelling or cursing at a subordinate in order to get your point across.

- Your answer to the question “Why?” is “Because I @#!*% said so!”

- When something goes wrong, you look around for the nearest subordinate to blame it on.

- When questioned by your boss about an issue, you readily and quickly point out why it is not your fault.

- You consider after-action reviews a waste of time.

- Education is for those who don't know something and, since you know everything, is not necessary for you.

- Subordinates no longer bother to tell you what is going on in the unit.

- Your position places you above the need for physical fitness tests or firearm qualifications.

- “Leads by example” is not a phrase you see on your 360-degree review.

If you see yourself in some of these, go to work and fix it. If you see your boss in these statements, copiously use a highlighter pen and then leave this article where he can see it. Better yet, leave it where his or her boss can see it. ◀◀

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