

Toxic Leaders: Symptom of Toxicity? (Part 2)

What are the symptoms of leadership toxicity in the workplace? Here are seven questions to evaluate symptoms of leadership toxicity in the workplace.

Do our followers live in fear and guilt?

Toxic leaders lead by fear and guilt. They instill fear among their followers and threaten them with job loss, wage freeze, uncertainty, estrangement, emotional blackmail, and severe punishment. They promote “group think”, stifle constructive criticism, promote mindless compliance and play to the followers’ basest fears and needs.

They divide and conquer for they fear consolidation of power and influence among the ranks and file. Fear in itself is not a bad motivator, but used as a primary form of motivation, it subsequently destroys trust. Used constantly, it creates uncertainty and dependency.

Are our followers worse off now than before?

Toxic leaders tend to leave their followers worse off than they found them. They wear people out. They create suspicions among rank and file. They poison people by propagating fraudulent values. They promote incompetent loyalists and corrupt people.

Most of all, they manufacture a culture of mistrust. They do so sometimes by eliminating, undermining, firing, or dividing to conquer. The result is that their biggest asset - people - live in perennial fear and guilt. They impair followers’ capacity for truth, honesty, respect, kindness, excellence, independence, and fairness.

Worse still, their followers will never blame their leaders for their depraved condition. When things turn sour, the leaders and their cronies will proclaim, “It’s nothing wrong with the milk – it’s your mouth.”

Do we subvert the structures of justice, transparency and excellence?

Toxic leaders disdain any systems and processes that prevent them from consolidating their power, aggrandizing themselves, and accumulating their wealth. They promote incompetence and inefficiency by encouraging a patronage system. There is a growing propensity to conceal. They confide only to a trusted few. Their greatest confidant is usually the finance person. Together, they do some creative accounting. This is where they reward those who “cooperate” with them. They also subvert structures of fairness. Their performance management system tends to be driven by personal fancies than a transparent system.

Do we use dishonest means to justify our ends?

In his book, *Battle for the Soul of Capitalism*, John Bagle, a 50-year old Wall Street insider and Founder-CEO of Vanguard International, abhors the rampant cheating among his peers, and makes this astonishing remark, “I believe the barrel itself - the very structure that holds the apples - is bad.”

He concludes that it is not just a handful of notorious companies like Enron and WorldCom that have overstated their profits. He notes that up to about 60 major corporations will have to restate their earnings as their stock market value equaled \$3 trillion! That is “an enormous part of the giant barrel of corporate capitalism.”

Toxic leaders can become obsessed with the bottom-line, forgetting about the through-put line, the performance rather than the process. They will not hesitate to mislead by giving misinformation or misdiagnosing issues and problems.

Do we treat shabbily those at the bottom of the heap?

One significant indicator of toxic leaders is how they treat those at the bottom of the totem pole in the organization. They usually see them as means to their own corporate ends rather than treating them with respect.

If they do treat the marginalized people well, it's part of a PR "kiss-the-baby" type campaign to bolster their own image and strengthen their base of support. In other words, toxic leaders use people for their own selfish ends. One corporate leader once intimated to me why he had treated a handicapped person in the office well - "It's good PR!"

Do we only nurture leaders and successors of our own kin and kind?

Toxic leaders seldom nurture their leaders, except their own kin or kind. They rather concentrate their resources to strengthen their base, build monuments for themselves, and enrich themselves rather than build the organization through strong value-centered, competent leadership.

They prefer building a totalitarian or dynastic regime. Often, they leave behind incompetent leaders and successors because they have put in little effort or time to nurture them. Further, they ensure that the cost of overthrowing them is so much that it is cheaper to keep them than to dispose them.

Do we as leaders often claim to speak on behalf of God & tend to behave like God?

Toxic leaders are unfortunately imbued with such powers that they often think that they speak on behalf of God and tend to behave like God. Sometimes, their followers are even embarrassed because they find their leaders are unable to grasp the real issues, act competently and effectively in leadership situations.

The scary part is that the leaders invoke God's name for their inept behaviors. They believe that they are right. And when they are proven wrong, they blame others or the situations. They almost never admit their errors. Their enormous egos have limited their capacity for self-renewal and learning. Toxic leaders forget that they are human first, and then secondly, leaders.

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