

Toxic Leaders: How Not to Lead? (Part 1)

“The spirit of an organization is created at the top.” Peter Drucker.ⁱ

“We’re worshipful of top executives who seem charismatic, visionary, and tough. So long as they’re lifting profits and stock prices, we’re willing to overlook that they can also be callous, conning, manipulative, deceitful, verbally and psychologically abusive, remorseless, exploitative, self-delusional, irresponsible, and megalomaniacal. So we collude in the elevation of leaders who are sadly insensitive to hurting others and society at large.” Alan Deutschmanⁱⁱ

Nobody starts out to be toxic. Neither does anyone aspire to be a toxic leader. Toxicity, like a wild gangrene, grows in us. It is a built-up trait. It thrives on chaotic environment. It surrounds itself with other toxic loyalists and kills off those who don’t follow their rules. In other words, toxic leaders can create hell on earth! How does one become a toxic leader?

Popularity and power have an intoxicating effect.

Unfettered power and undeniable popularity can condition a leader to believe in his own publicity. The road to hell is paved with many good intentions. Most toxic leaders start off wanting to make the world better. And they did so, at least initially. However, success and fame eventually get into their heads. They become more powerful as their followers, having tasted victory, entrust them with more and more power. Very soon, their popularity turns into grandiose delusions and fame into infamy.

Self-centered Arrogance: Believing that we can do no wrong.

Peter Drucker warns, “The leader who basically focuses on himself or herself is going to mislead. The three most charismatic leaders in this century inflicted more suffering on the human race than almost any trio in history: Hitler, Stalin and Mao.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Pride is essentially self-centeredness paraded on the stage with a spotlight shining on the “special one.” The others in the team pale into insignificance or at most, serve as a supporting cast. Toxic leaders believe that they are the “special ones” and therefore untouchable.

“The psychopath has no allegiance to the company at all, just to self. A psychopath is playing a short-term parasitic game,” reports Paul Babiak, an industrial psychologist.^{iv} They live on their followers and the followers on them. It becomes an incestuous co-dependency. This leads to the belief by their followers that they can do no wrong. Or even if they do, their mistakes and misdemeanors are covered-up or justified. “Anyway, who can be perfect?” is the mantra for their coterie of hangers-on.

Crises serve and reinforce self-belief and position.

Crises often offer positive opportunities for toxic leaders to thrive because they can crystallize the agenda to achieve focus for accomplishing tasks. Bureaucratic obstacles can be bypassed in the name of “survival.” Often leaders like to keep their organizations in constant crisis mode so that they can perpetuate their powers, philosophy and policies.

In a cover story, “Is Your Boss A Psychopath?” Alan Deutschman, a senior writer for *FastCompany*, writes, “There’s evidence that the business climate has become more hospitable to psychopaths in recent years.” and “...the New Economy, with its rule-breaking and roller-coaster results, is just dandy for folks with psychopathic traits.”^v

Severe downsizing, restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, fueled by an uncertain economy allow toxic leaders to thrive as they have no difficulty dealing with the consequences of rapid change like chopping off people, cooking the books, and displaying uncouth behaviors.

Paul Babiak asserts, "Organizational chaos provides both the necessary stimulation for psychopathic thrill seeking and sufficient cover for psychopathic manipulation and abusive behavior."

Unchecked weakness – Blind loyalty is rewarded.

Although character flaws begin to surface and loom large, this is often left unchecked. In fact, their weakness is covered up by their strengths. Alan Deutschman reports that psychopathic bosses are typically likeable. They make us believe that they reciprocate loyalty and friendship. They have developed an actor's expertise in evoking our empathy which makes it easier for them to "play" us.^{vi}

According to Michael Maccoby, a psychotherapist, "They have an element of emotional intelligence, of being able to see our emotions very clearly and manipulate them."^{vii} When we realize that they were conning us all along, we feel betrayed.

With their consolidated power and unchallenged authority, whistle blowers are very few in between. Loyalists are recognized and championed. As a result, the toxic leaders' growing weaknesses and corrupt schemes are left unimpeded.

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Why is leading people difficult? Find out in ***Knowing Others: The More Difficult Aspect of Self-Leadership (Part 1)***

Managing Self is one of the most difficult aspects in self-leadership. What are the areas that need self-management? Read ***Self-Management - The Control Leaders Need***

ⁱ Drucker, P. & Maciariello, 2004. J.A. The Daily Drucker. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. New York, NY. USA.

ⁱⁱ Deutschman, A. Is Your Boss A Psychopath? Fast Company, July 2005 pp 46-51.

ⁱⁱⁱ Drucker, P. & Maciariello, 2004. J.A. The Daily Drucker. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. New York, NY. USA.

^{iv} Deutschman, A. Is Your Boss A Psychopath? Fast Company, July 2005 pp 46-51.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid