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## ARE YOU A TOXIC LEADER?

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### OVERVIEW:

*Leadership presents itself in many different forms. There is the anointed formal leader of a team, situational leaders who step up when presented the opportunity, informal leaders who influence others, and leaders by title who have a business card which describes them as a leader. All are important as they all influence team dynamics by their actions, inactions, mindsets, and behaviours.*

*The greatest influence on the performance of any team is leadership. There is an old Chinese proverb that suggests "Fish Stink from the Head!" A leader or group of leaders is the single biggest influence on how any team performs in any circumstance. It is what a leader does and does not do that will ultimately impact on how a leader is viewed.*

*In this article we are going to explore toxic leadership, what it is, how it impacts on team members, what it looks like and how it can be averted. Toxic leadership is perhaps the most ignored symptom of poor performance. People leave poor team cultures which is always presided over by toxic leadership*

### TOXIC LEADERSHIP DEFINED:

There are different types of toxic leaders. A toxic leader can be someone who is not trusted, perhaps despised by many, or lacks the respect and integrity of their colleagues. They can also be someone who is silent, does not act on issues, is unaware of or does not care about the ripple effect of what they do and do not do, and ultimately preside over a poor team culture

The Ivey Business Journal describes a toxic leader as **"Individuals who by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organisations or communities they have the misfortune to lead."**

Often Toxic Leaders have noble visions but grand illusions on what is required to achieve their vision. **A toxic leader will suck the oxygen, commitment, and enthusiasm out teams.**

The traits and characteristics of toxic leaders are numerous. Read through the following toxic leadership traits and see if you can identify your own examples of leaders you may know or have observed who have some of these qualities. How do you rate yourself? Often a toxic leader has a combination of these, and the first symptom is often denial.

**Often a toxic leader is the only person not aware that they are indeed a toxic leader!**

**TYPES OF TOXIC LEADERS:**

**THE FAVOURITIST**

- They have obvious favourites and hence are deemed to have an inconsistent set of values or performance standards
- They tolerate inappropriate behaviours and values in favour of excellent performance (the best performing salesman / player / manager will be tolerated even though they may be not respected or not demonstrate agreed team values)
- They ignore or cut short colleagues and team members to jump to the aid or response to people they deem more important

*A Favouritist often is the cause of intolerable team dynamics and seem blind to this or incapable of acting on a favourite's poor performance or indiscretions.*

**THE HYPOCRITE**

- Their actions do not reflect their narrative (words)... they do not walk the talk
- They do not deliver on their promises or commitments. They cannot be trusted to act
- What they value and require others to do is not reflected in how they act, behave, reward others and measure success

*A Hypocritical Leader is quite simply not believed. They are often missing in action when things get difficult, tight or demanding. They often put their own self-interest or self-importance above common team commitments. They fly business class and park in valet whilst demanding cost cutting measures and efficiencies in others. They are incapable of leading by example and have zero credibility.*

**THE DEFLECTOR**

- Nothing is ever their fault, hence nothing sticks to them, often referred to as "Teflon"
- They justify and lay the blame for things not delivered or commitments not met
- They rarely if ever champion a cause or an issue and never effect change

*Deflectors usually hide behind a title or position. They become pseudo experts with lots of commentary of others, but when they are required to lead they will default to bureaucratic decision making processes or policies, or defer the decision to others, then justify - lay blame for poor consequences.*

**THE TIME BOMB**

- Their temperament is inconsistent. They often fly off the handle into fits of rage for no apparent rationale or when put under pressure. Are inconsistent
- Are argumentative and never seem to be happy. Will often be intimidating
- Are abusive in nature and use inappropriate language and have bullying behaviour tendencies

*Time Bombs can be described as being irritable, unstable, insensitive, benign or maladjusted. There is a sense of incompetence or cowardness about how they view the world, make decisions or engage their team.*

### **THE TUNNEL VISIONER**

- Only see things in their own small narrow domain
- They do not appreciate the world other people live in, only their world.
- Have a warped or skewed view of the world with perhaps an unhealthy life balance

*These leaders are dangerous. Sometimes they are subject matter experts, and use this to impose their views across other unrelated areas. Other times they have an overly weighted balance to what they deem as important, regardless of what is happening in the world around them and hence make decisions and priorities based on this view of the world.*

### **THE WISDOM-LESS LEADER**

- They ignore or stay silent on obvious breaches of acceptable behaviours / values / morals
- Their moral compass is poor. They often make poor value judgements
- They are ignorant to the wider world, often making gross generalisations and label people inappropriately

*Wisdom-less leaders makes poor life judgements, uses inappropriate language in wrong settings, makes incorrect moral assessments of others, labels people with incorrect generalisations and often has lapses of personal judgement. Lacks respect for others.*

### **THE NARCISSIST**

- They lose sight of the big picture and bring everything back to their needs and priorities
- Their world is the only world. Their narrative and language is all about themselves and their needs. They insist on status
- They prioritise everything to their own benefit and hence exhibit selfish and greedy tendencies

*It is all about them. How they feel, what suits them, what their priorities and how things fit in with their needs and priorities. Have little or no empathy and burn relationships as a result. Never have real longevity in leadership positions.*

### **THE KILL JOY**

- There is an absence of fun, energy, resilience and enthusiasm in the teams they lead
- They do not reward, recognise or celebrate success
- They have an excessive focus on rules and conformity, so kill innovation and creativity

*Life is too short to put up with this type of leader. They suck the energy out of team commitment and enthusiasm. They tend to be task focused and miss the key warning signs of what makes team chemistry work. Usually have a low emotional intelligence gauge and think team success is all about KPI's and targets!*

### **THE POLITICIAN**

- Nothing happens literally. They do not personally act on anything, but boy can they talk!
- They deflect to others - or abrogate responsibility with "over to you" decisions
- They have a tendency to escalate things to others. Very hierarchical and require "sign off" and "permissions" for things to get done
- Hide behind a veil of policies, procedures and due process rather than making good judgements at the time!
- Never own anything - but quick to judge others

*Kill empowerment and decision making by pushing people into silo thinking and behaviours. They value symbols of personal authority. Have a "command & control" approach to leadership.*

### **THE POPULIST**

- Do not take on or act on the hard decisions. Leaves problems for others to act on
- Do not have the strength or courage of their convictions. Prefers to defer, delay and obfuscate difficult conversations and decisions
- Values being liked over driving performance and outcomes

*These leaders start off by being popular and well liked, but after a period of time their lack of substance and lack of any real vision for the future will create frustrations and stifle creativity and innovation. Are unlikely to effect change or progress.*

## THE COMMAND & CONTROLLER

- Believe they are the smartest person in the room
- Need direct reporting lines on everything
- Micro manage the team and all decisions
- Often talk about empowering others – but their actions and behaviours are very controlling and centralised around them
- Quick to find fault and point out mistakes, errors and faults
- Have a requirement for everything to report to them

*These leaders are often insecure and empire builders. They tend to over-supervise their team, make demands and set timeframes around their needs and assume as the name suggests – a command and control leadership style*

## THE SABOTEUR

- Driven by jealousy or feelings of insecurity the saboteur deliberately undermines and scuttles the efforts of others (no matter how noble or logical)
- They like to surround themselves with loyal and like-minded people to them who collectively plot and find fault in others
- Have their own agenda that is often unstated, but revealed through their actions and behaviours
- Will often talk in supportive tones to a stated position, but then actively seek to undermine or lobby others to take a different position or course of action

*This type of leader often creates unnecessary tensions and unrest amongst team members and colleagues. Their actions and behaviours need to be called out early by others*



## LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT MOMENTS:

**The test of the calibre and character of a Leader is all the moments that make up the tenure of a Leader.** It happens over time. How a leader acts and behaves in different circumstances, how they adapt and respond to the needs of the people and teams they serve and influence, is how people will ultimately judge and describe a leader, and how they impacted on them at a personal level. Leadership requires a clear moral compass, balanced thinking and appropriate mindsets to different circumstances and moments

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO AVERT BEING A TOXIC LEADER?

**Let's be very clear, there is no leadership course, 360 degree feedback tool, or personality psych test in the world that can change or influence toxic leaders.** It is about values – mindsets – behaviours – language used and role modelling desired actions.

Interestingly toxic leaders may unite their teams against them! The common enemy becomes the leader, as individual team members combine to form a “safety in numbers” tactic in order to deal with the ramifications of a toxic leader. **If a leader’s trust, respect, or integrity has been lost then, it can rarely be regained.**

If you have a leader in your team that does not reflect the behaviours, culture, or the espoused values of your team, then it is an easy call, they have to be removed. **The consequences for tolerating a toxic leader are catastrophic. It is like a cancer. It will kill the energy, confidence, commitment and enthusiasm of a team.**

**Volunteerism is something a toxic leader will kill. Good performers will assume a “what is the point?” mindset.**

If you are a leader of a team and sense you do not have their trust, support, or commitment, you must stop and engage with them and genuinely seek their views and feedback. **Any feedback is good feedback - as without it - no learning can take place.** If you cannot do this, you cannot lead. If you are prepared to engage and seek their feedback, then set some simple short term agreed goals and commitments and stick to it. **Do what you say you will do.** People are well intended and will usually afford an opportunity for a leader to renew and re-engage, provided this is a once off. Serial toxic leaders who are repeat offenders do not get a second chance with their team.

If you are in a team with a toxic leader, you have to unite as one team and confront your toxic leader as a single respectful team. This will test the true intentions and character of the leader. If they are positive and genuine, they will listen respectfully and agree to work on a plan to re-engage and rebuild the trust and respect of the team. If this cannot be done the situation is unsalvageable.

## **SIX TIPS TO AVOID BEING DESCRIBED AS A TOXIC LEADER:**

### **Tip 1: EMPATHY:**

Have empathy for people, listen to their needs and build trust. Never label people in generalist terms. Everyone has feelings, needs, priorities and challenges. People are not machines and hence regular meaningful check ins are required via face-to-face meetings. This is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of how people think, learn and prioritise. Empathy requires strong communication, listening, observation and feedback loops. It helps if a leader has an ability to put themselves in others shoes (all stakeholders) in order to gain a greater insight on what it is they may lead or influence. **Take time as a leader to STOP - LOOK - LISTEN and ACT.** Without both formal and informal mechanisms to do this it is impossible to lead effectively.

### **Tip 2: HUMOUR:**

A happy and positive demeanour to life helps builds an air of trust, respect and enthusiasm.

*“There is nothing more calming in difficult moments than to have someone cheerfully supporting you!” -*

*Mother Theresa.*

A team with good humour has a leader with a supportive positive and optimistic outlook. Happy teams are more resilient, open and honest. Teams that have fun are more likely to be successful, innovative, agile and adaptive to change. This starts with the Leader and their positive or negative disposition to life.

**Tip 3: BALANCE:**

*"Do not let the behaviours of others destroy your inner peace!" - Dalai Lama.*

Life is too short to spend time with toxic leaders. There is a huge world out there and life is meant to be lived to its fullest (the highs the lows, the here and now, the good and the bad, the fun times and lonely times and everything else... a leader inspires others to go out and experience the lot). There are 168 hours in a week, how and with whom you choose to spend this with is your call. Every life is unique make sure you put time equally into the things that matter as a leader, and role model this. Success at the expense of your health or happiness is failure in our book.

**Tip 4: STABILITY:**

A stable temper and approach to life is central to building trust. Flying off the handle into fits of rage is one of the surest ways to kill team dynamics. Being consistent in your temper, language and approach will build a sense of engagement and discipline. We all have moments of frustration and exhilaration. Celebrate regularly milestones, achievements, outcomes, moments or indeed life. Implement coping strategies or techniques when times are difficult or frustrating. Treat failures and stuff ups as a learning and pursue a course of continual improvement. If things are bumpy communicate more regularly with your team and look for small wins to build confidence and connectedness. As the old saying goes, *"You need to experience Winter to appreciate Summer!"*

**Tip 5: TRANSPARENCY:**

Never ever hide the truth. Be open, honest, transparent and consistent in your approach to dealing with people, performance, planning and feedback. Key for a leader is transparency of action. Do what you say you will do. Act on issues and deal there and then with issues of poor or inappropriate behaviour. Trust is built by a leader by being transparent in your actions, decision making and role modelling. As a leader you have to be able to pass the "sense test." If people get a sense of what you are saying and doing is the truth and factual, then there will be a sense of trust. Likewise, if people do not get the sense of what you are saying and doing is factual then it is highly likely there is a lack of transparency and engagement with the leader.

**Tip 6: Honour Your Commitments:**

Do what you say you will do - and then follow up with the team and their lived experience. Close feedback loops, check in regularly with the team around their sense of progress, and encourage them to provide feedback - when things are going well - or when things are off track. There is a collective responsibility for team culture and team performance. When things get challenging or a little bumpy - this is when the true leadership colours of any leader is revealed.

## **FINALLY:**

Leadership is hard work. No one gets it right all of the time. All leaders have moments of challenge, feelings of insecurity, and times of being uncertain. This is normal. It is during moments of vulnerability that a leader needs to be brave and courageous enough to admit this, talk to colleagues and team members, and foster a sense of togetherness and commitment. This can only happen by communicating and levelling with others. **Seeking the input and support of the team is not a weakness, but a strength of leadership!**

**“The culture of any organization is shaped by the **worst behaviour** the leaders are **willing to tolerate.**”**