



U.S. Department of Defense

## Factor Rating Interpretation Guide Toxic Leadership

### What is Toxic Leadership?

*Toxic Leadership* measures the perception that leaders disregard input, ridicule others, and have self-promoting tendencies.<sup>1</sup> *Toxic Leadership* also includes behaviors that are demeaning, marginalizing, and/or coercive. These types of leaders are also prone to acts of aggression.<sup>2</sup>

The DEOCS asks participants to rate their immediate supervisor and senior enlisted leader on *Toxic Leadership*. The following items are used to assess *Toxic Leadership* using a five-point response scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Participants are asked to think about the past three months when responding, or to think about their time with their current unit/organization if they joined less than three months ago.

- My immediate supervisor ridicules people in my unit.
- My immediate supervisor acts only in the best interest of their own advancement.
- My immediate supervisor ignores input from people in my unit that they do not agree with.
- My unit's senior NCO/SEL ridicules people in my unit.
- My unit's senior NCO/SEL acts only in the best interest of their own advancement.
- My unit's senior NCO/SEL ignores input from people in my unit that they do not agree with.

*Note: Survey questions may differ depending on whether the organization is a military unit, Military Service Academy, or civilian organization. Please see the sample survey for each population on the Assessment to Solutions web site (<https://www.defenseculture.mil/Assessment-to-Solutions/A2S-Home/>) for exact wording.*

### Why is it important?

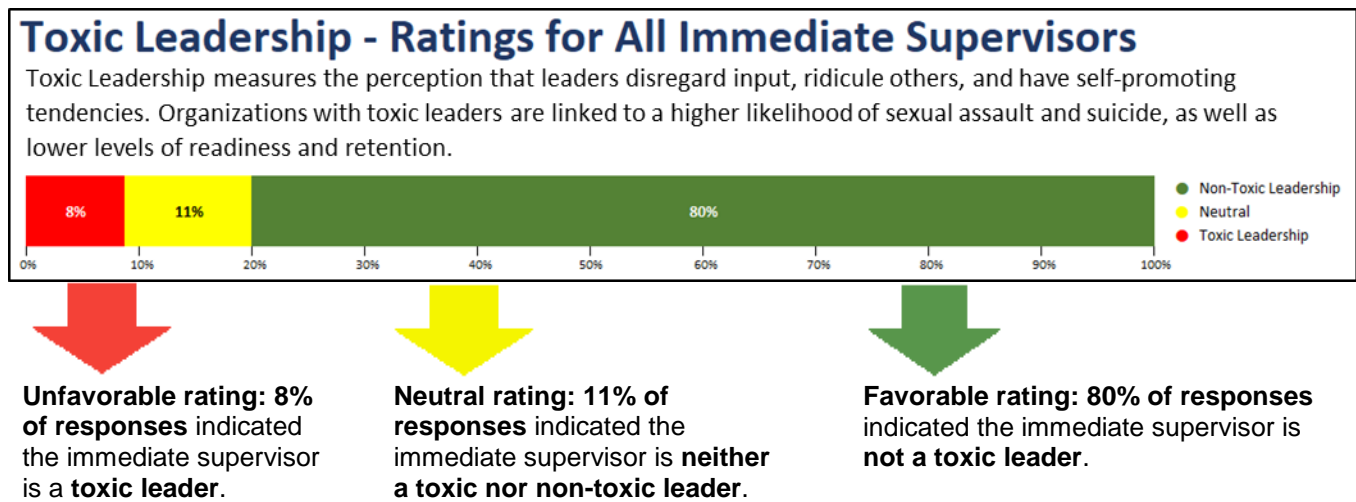
Research has shown that “*Toxic Leadership*” behaviors create negative climates in the Military<sup>1</sup> and other civilian workplaces.<sup>2</sup> This type of negative leadership can reduce organizational commitment, decrease respectful behaviors between unit members, lead to poor performance, and decrease retention.<sup>3,4</sup> For example, the Annual Survey of Army Leadership continues to find that leaders who engaged in *Toxic Leadership* have an adverse effect on command climate, including work quality, engagement, and morale of their subordinates.<sup>5</sup> The findings suggest that this type of negative leadership has contributed to increased turnover in the Military.<sup>1</sup> *Toxic Leadership* has also been correlated with tolerance of sexual assault. The study found that these *Toxic Leadership* styles, as perceived by Service women, were strongly associated with the Service women's risk of, or protection from, sexual assault in non-deployed settings. In fact, negative leader behavior was associated with at least doubling Service women's odds of sexual assault in the Military.<sup>6</sup>

In extreme circumstances, *Toxic Leadership* styles can contribute to suicidal ideation. An investigation of U.S. soldiers in Iraq who had committed or attempted suicide found that while the soldiers had other issues in their personal lives, the victims also had in common at least one leader (sometimes more) who made their lives “a living hell.” The author notes that the evidence did not show that there is a direct link of *Toxic Leadership* styles to committed or attempted suicide, but they do argue that leader support, or lack thereof, was a common issue that contributed to the suicide or suicide attempt.<sup>7</sup>

For more information on how to review your DEOCS results with these key outcomes in mind, please see the “Strategic Target Outcome Guide” in the Quick Links menu of the DEOCS dashboard.

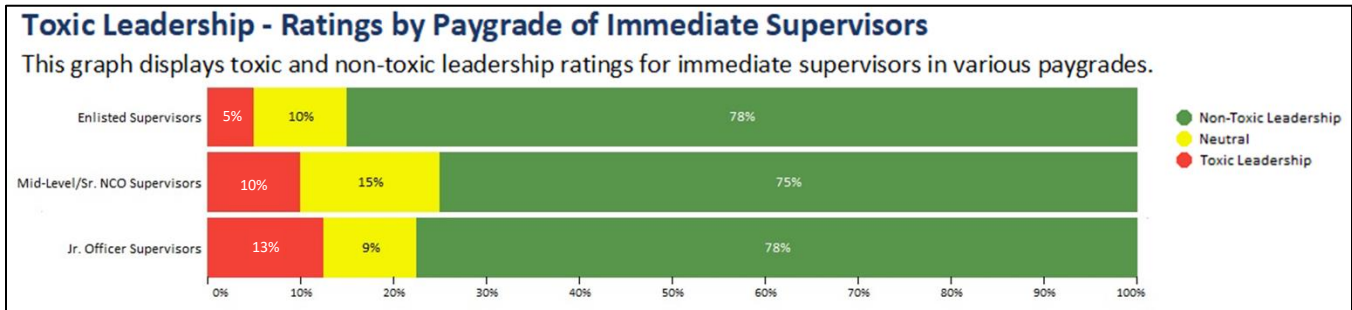
## How do I read my factor ratings?

The DEOCS dashboard displays results for *Toxic Leadership* in a stacked bar graph showing ratings for **Toxic Leadership**, **Neutral**, and **Non-Toxic Leadership**. In addition, if your unit/organization has a senior enlisted leader/senior NCO, you may also see an additional stacked bar graph with ratings for this individual. Because *Toxic Leadership* is a factor that is measured by multiple questions, you should interpret the results as “X% of responses” (not participants). An example is shown below:



If your unit/organization had enough participants, you may also see these ratings broken down by paygrade of immediate supervisor in additional stacked bar graphs. On the survey, participants were asked to select the paygrade of their immediate supervisor and at least five responses were needed in order to display these results. For example, if you see *Toxic Leadership* ratings for enlisted supervisors, this means that at least five participants indicated their immediate supervisor was an enlisted member and answered the three questions about *Toxic Leadership* for immediate supervisors. If your unit/organization has immediate supervisors who are enlisted members, but you do not see ratings for them, it may be because there were fewer than five participants who indicated their immediate supervisor was an enlisted member.

The example below shows results for multiple paygrades of immediate supervisors, including enlisted supervisors, mid-level or senior NCO supervisors, and junior officer supervisors. An example of how to read these ratings is provided for junior officer supervisors, but the other paygrades can be interpreted in a similar manner.



**Unfavorable rating: 13% of responses** indicated junior officer immediate supervisors are **toxic leaders**.



**Neutral rating: 9% of responses** indicated junior officer immediate supervisors are **neither toxic nor non-toxic leaders**.

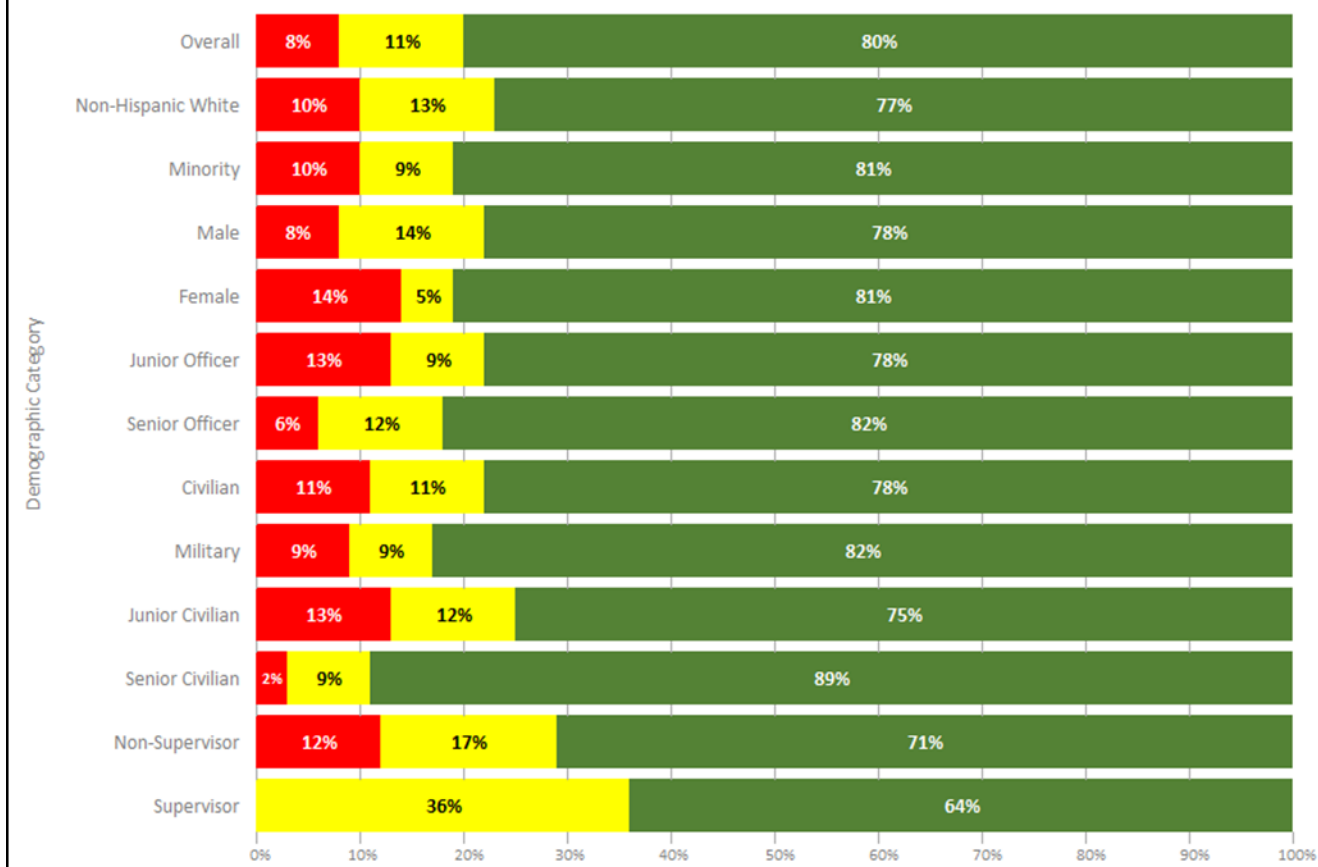


**Favorable rating: 78% of responses** indicated junior officer immediate supervisors are **not toxic leaders**.

For the graph showing results by demographic categories, the percentages represent the percentage of responses from each demographic category that were unfavorable, neutral, or favorable.

## Toxic Leadership - Ratings for All Immediate Supervisors by Demographic Category

This graph displays Toxic Leadership ratings for all immediate supervisors by demographic category. No data are displayed if fewer than five people from a demographic category responded to this set of questions.



The first bar will always show the overall results and will be the same percentages that are shown in the stacked bar graph. The next bars will represent various demographic categories for your organization. These results can help determine whether some groups of people in your organization have particularly high or low perceptions of climate factors. In addition, you may have different categories than in the example above. If your organization did not have any participants from a particular demographic category or had fewer than five participants from a particular category, you would not see those categories in your graph. For more information on how the demographic groups are created, please see the “Data Overview” in the Quick Links menu of the DEOCS dashboard.

In this example, the unfavorable ratings (marked in red) can be interpreted as:

- 10% of responses from non-Hispanic White participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader, and 10% of responses from minority participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader;
- 8% of responses from male participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader, while 14% of responses from female participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader;
- 13% of responses from junior officers indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader, while 6% of responses from senior officers indicated the immediate supervisor

- is a toxic leader;
- 11% of responses from civilian participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader, while 9% of responses from military participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader;
- 13% of responses from junior civilians indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader, while 2% of responses from senior civilians indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader;
- 12% of responses from non-supervisor participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader, while 0% of responses from supervisory participants indicated the immediate supervisor is a toxic leader.

The neutral ratings (marked in yellow) can be interpreted as:

- 13% of responses from non-Hispanic White participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic, and 9% of responses from minority participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic;
- 14% of responses from male participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic, while 5% of responses from female participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic;
- 9% of responses from junior officers indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic, while 12% of responses from senior officers indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic;
- 11% of responses from civilian participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic, while 9% of responses from military participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic;
- 12% of responses from junior civilians indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic, while 9% of responses from senior civilians indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic;
- 17% of responses from non-supervisor participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic, while 36% of responses from supervisory participants indicated the immediate supervisor is neither toxic nor non-toxic.


The favorable ratings (marked in green) can be interpreted as:

- 77% of responses from non-Hispanic White participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader, and 81% of responses from minority participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader;
- 78% of responses from male participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader, while 81% of responses from female participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader;
- 78% of responses from junior officers indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader, while 82% of responses from senior officers indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader;
- 78% of responses from civilian participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader, while 82% of responses from military participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader;
- 75% of responses from junior civilians indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader, while 89% of responses from senior civilians indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader;
- 71% of responses from non-supervisor participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader, while 64% of responses from supervisory participants indicated the immediate supervisor is not a toxic leader.


You may also see trends over time for your *Toxic Leadership* unfavorable ratings if there are

previous surveys with the same unit identification code (UIC) and the same commander/leader.



When applicable, trends over time are available in the dashboard by clicking on this icon: . They also appear in the PDF reports as a table. Even if your report includes trends over time, the results may not be comparable in certain circumstances. First, the questions used to measure this factor changed from the DEOCS 5.0 to the current version, DEOCS 5.1. It was measured using five questions on DEOCS 5.0 and is now measured by only three questions. There were slight wording changes between versions. Use caution when comparing trends from DEOCS 5.0 to 5.1 for this factor in particular. Second, it is important to understand differences in roster size and roster composition at different time points as these items may also impact comparability of trend results. Take a close look at the number of participants registered, surveys returned, and the response rate for any surveys for which trends are available to report; use caution when comparing trends over time if there are big differences in these numbers between surveys. Other things, such as deployments or changes in policy, may also make trends less comparable. For more information on factor rating trends, please see the “Data Overview” in the Quick Links menu of the DEOCS dashboard.



Finally, you may see an alert  for your *Toxic Leadership* ratings for immediate supervisors and/or the senior enlisted leader. This means that your unfavorable rating for *Toxic Leadership* for the specified leader type is **very high** compared to the other unfavorable ratings for this factor from all other units/organizations that completed a DEOCS. When applicable, this alert icon appears in the dashboard inside the “Risk Factors – Unfavorable Ratings” heading; click on the icon to see if *Toxic Leadership* for a specified leader type is listed in the table. The alert icon may also appear in the *Toxic Leadership* sections of the PDF reports. To identify whether your *Toxic Leadership* ratings receive an alert, cut-off scores were created by rank-ordering all unfavorable ratings for this factor. Separate cut-off scores were used for immediate supervisors and the senior enlisted leader. If your unfavorable rating for *Toxic Leadership* for immediate supervisors and/or the senior enlisted leader is above the cut-off score, this icon will appear in your report. There are unique cut-off scores for each factor. Because of this, you may notice that some of the factors for which you have an alert have very different ratings. For more information on how these alerts are created, please see the “Data Overview” in the Quick Links menu of the DEOCS dashboard.

## How are my unit's/organization's ratings created?

*Toxic Leadership* ratings for immediate supervisors and the Senior NCO/Senior Enlisted Leader are created by combining responses to three questions from a five-point *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* scale, as shown in the example below.

Toxic Leadership Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
My immediate supervisor ridicules people in my unit.	63% (71)	18% (20)	13% (15)	3% (3)	3% (3)	100% (112)
My immediate supervisor ignores input from people in my unit that they do not agree with.	63% (63)	22% (22)	6% (6)	7% (7)	2% (2)	100% (100)
My immediate supervisor acts only in the best interest of their own advancement.	53% (59)	22% (25)	14% (16)	8% (9)	3% (3)	100% (112)
	<b>Non-Toxic Leadership</b>		<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Toxic Leadership</b>		Total responses <b>324</b>
	$(71+20+63+22+59+25) / 324 =$ <b>80%</b>		$(15+6+16) / 324 =$ <b>11%</b>	$(3+3+7+2+9+3) / 324 =$ <b>8%</b>		

The table above displays the percentage of responses (and number of responses in parentheses) for each question across the five response options (*Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, *Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*). For the first question, 71 participants selected *Strongly Disagree*; this represents 63% of participants that responded to this question ( $71 / 112 = .634$  or 63%).

Note that percentages are calculated out of the total number of participants responding to that question and not the total number of participants taking the survey. Participants can skip questions, so you may notice that total responses to questions vary. In the above example, 112 people responded to the first question so all percentages in this row use 112 as the denominator. 100 people responded to the second question, so all percentages in this row use 100 as the denominator. In addition, factor ratings may not always add to 100% due to rounding.



- The **unfavorable** rating, named **Toxic Leadership**, is a combination of all responses of *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* from **all three** questions in the *Toxic Leadership* scale.
  - For this example, three people strongly agreed with the first question and three agreed. In addition, two people strongly agreed with the second question and seven agreed, and so on. In total, 27 responses were either *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to these three questions ( $3+3+7+2+9+3 = 27$ ).
  - To produce an overall score for **Toxic Leadership** representing unfavorable reactions to these three questions, the total number of responses (27) is divided by the total number of people who responded to all of the *Toxic Leadership* questions. There was a total of 324 ( $112+100+112$ ) responses to all three questions. **This produces a Toxic Leadership rating of 8% ( $27 / 324 = .0833$ ).**



- To create the **Neutral** rating, the same process above is followed, except the score is created from only one response option. The *Neither Agree nor Disagree* responses are added from all three questions.
  - For this example, there are 37 *Neither Agree nor Disagree* responses across all three questions (15+6+16 = 37). This total is divided by the total number of responses to all of the questions (37 / 324 = .114). **This rounds to a Neutral rating of 11%.**
- To create the **favorable** rating, named **Non-Toxic Leadership**, the *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* responses are combined.
  - For this example, that is 71+20+63+22+59+25 = 260 total responses of either *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree*. This total is divided by the total number of responses to all of the questions (260 / 324 = .8025). **This rounds to a Non-Toxic Leadership rating of 80%.**

## How do I know if my factor ratings are good or bad?

The DEOCS team is working on a data-driven approach that will help you understand what a rating means for an organization's likelihood of positive or negative outcomes. In the meantime, we recommend using the following strategies to help put your *Toxic Leadership* ratings into context and understand whether actions should be taken to address high unfavorable ratings:

1. If applicable, review the information in the alert icon  to see if your *Toxic Leadership* ratings immediate supervisors and/or the senior enlisted leader are called out. This icon would appear in the dashboard and in the PDF reports if your unit's/organization's unfavorable rating for *Toxic Leadership* for the specified leader type is very high compared to all other units/organizations that completed a DEOCS. You should consider taking action to lower this rating.
2. Look at the Item Summary table on the *Toxic Leadership* details page for each leader type to understand which questions may be driving your unfavorable ratings. This factor is created from three questions, so for each leader type compare the percentage of participants who selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* to each question. If there are questions that have a higher percentage of participants who selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*, these questions are driving a higher unfavorable rating and could help you pinpoint more specific actions to decrease your unfavorable rating for *Toxic Leadership*.
3. Examine the bar graphs showing the overall unfavorable rating for *Toxic Leadership* for each leader type and the unfavorable ratings by various demographic groups. Look at each group's rating in relation to the overall unit/organization rating. If any groups have particularly high unfavorable ratings for *Toxic Leadership*, this could help you plan actions to decrease your unfavorable rating in specific areas of your organization.
4. If applicable, review your *Toxic Leadership* unfavorable rating trends over time for each leader type. You can view these trends by clicking on this icon  in the dashboard; they also appear as a table in the PDF reports. Take note if your ratings are going up over time. You may need to take action to reverse this trend.

## Factor Improvement Tools for Toxic Leadership

The following resources may be useful as you make plans or take action to improve your *Toxic Leadership* ratings. Each resource listing contains a description, a link, and the relevant



audience. Some resources may be more appropriate for the commander/leader, unit/organization personnel, survey administrators, or the Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce (IPPW); the relevant audience advises which group may benefit from use of the recommended resource.

- **Army Takes on its Own Toxic Leaders.** Discusses toxic leadership in the Military, how it is defined, and how it is being tackled.  
<https://www.npr.org/2014/01/06/259422776/army-takes-on-its-own-toxic-leaders>  
Audience: Unit personnel, survey admin, IPPW

## Scientific Research References on Toxic Leadership

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