

# An Overview for Command Teams Leaders to Combat Toxic Leadership



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### Overview on Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is a multidimensional construct (e.g., Dobbs & Do, 2019) that can be defined by three core areas: a toxic leader will display repeated negative systemic attributes and behaviors; the subordinates and the organization, to include the climate and goals, are negatively affected by the toxic leader; and the overall organizational environment(s) may reinforce toxic leadership (e.g., Babos & Rusu, 2020; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Lipman-Blumen, 2010). Padilla et al. (2007) further reinforce that leaders, environments, and subordinates—or “followers”—all play a role in toxic leadership. Overall, toxic leadership is a complex process of influence between flawed, toxic, or ineffective leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments, which unfolds over time and, on balance, culminates in destructive group or organizational outcomes that compromise the quality of life for internal and external constituents and detract from their group-focused goals or purposes (Thoroughgood et al., 2018, 2021).

No official definition for toxic leadership has been published by the Department of Defense (DoD), although there is a directive requiring training and instruction regarding the topic of toxic leadership, DoDI 1350.02, *DoD Military Equal Opportunity Program* (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense Personnel and Readiness, September 4 2020). Some Services utilize similar terms (e.g., counter-productive leadership) interchangeably with the term toxic leadership. Army regulations AR 600-100 (Department of the Army, 2017) defines toxic leadership as a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. To be classified as toxic, the counterproductive behaviors must be recurrent and have a deleterious impact on the organization’s performance or the welfare of subordinates.

## **Toxic Leaders**

Leaders can be toxic intentionally or unintentionally. For example, a leader who engages in toxic behavior may have no malicious intent to protect themselves and their position (Lipman-Blumen 2005; Milosevic et al., 2019); when someone who is well-liked or respected displays toxic behaviors, others may justify their behaviors or dismiss them entirely. Intentional toxic leaders can behave in erratic or unpredictable ways, have poor self-control, lack necessary competences on leadership or scope of work, and avoid learning from mistakes (e.g. Akca, 2017; Anderson, 2019; Babos & Rusu, 2020; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017).

Toxic leaders can exert influence upwards on their own leaders and downwards on their subordinates. For example, toxic leaders' downward influences can include intentionally withholding important or relevant information, using rank to justify questionable decisions, harmfully criticizing subordinate's work, and limiting interaction and autonomy of subordinates (Milosevic et al., 2019). Toxic leaders' upward influences can include participating in self-promoting behaviors, taking undue credit for positive outcomes while blaming others for negative outcomes, and praising their supervisor's ideas and initiatives regardless of the actual potential or value to the organization (Milosevic et al., 2019).

Toxic leaders are characterized by the harmful consequences on subordinates and climate (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Toxic leadership is especially prevalent in traditionally masculine environments (Matos et al., 2018). Despite the negative consequences, a toxic leader may still be able to motivate their subordinates to be engaged in the workplace, especially among men (Matos et al., 2018). In fact, some leaders may have learned these behaviors from their own leaders and may have wrongly internalized them as necessary to ensure subordinates are "tough," "ready," "kept in line," and ultimately, in their view, more likely to accomplish the mission (Dagless,

2018). Toxic leaders are skilled at walking the line between being unpleasant and blatantly violating policy (Milosevic et al., 2019). This can make it difficult for subordinates and leaders to find appropriate ways to respond. This mindset can make correction and change difficult, especially when these ideas prevail among leaders throughout the chain of command. When this is the case, leaders higher in the chain of command can promote and reinforce the negative behaviors of their subordinate leaders, who, in turn, will teach and reinforce these behaviors to their subordinates, creating both a toxic climate and cycle (Dagless, 2018). While any leader may engage in these behaviors at one point or another, the repetitiveness and degree of seriousness separates honest mistakes from a pattern of toxic leadership.

### **Subordinates**

Toxic leaders are primarily empowered by conformers and colluders (Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007), although even those that reject their influence can also become enablers, depending upon their response to the toxic leader. When confronted with a toxic leader, subordinates can respond in one of three ways: reject, conform, or collude (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017).

#### ***Reject***

Effective followers are those who recognize that a leadership style is toxic and reject it. Speaking up, especially to those leaders who can assess and evaluate the toxic leader, may be the most obvious form of rejection. Other followers simply chose to avoid the toxic leader in three ways: ignoring the toxicity and focusing on themselves and their goals, circumventing the toxic leader, or leaving the organization (Akca, 2017; Babos & Rusu, 2020; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Milosevic et al., 2019). Consequently, there can be a detriment to Force readiness due to the loss of valuable trained/skilled personnel, which can lead to increases in

recruitment and training costs (Akca, 2017; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo, et al., 2017) as well as fewer people to promote.

### ***Conform***

A common response to toxic leadership is conforming or accepting the behavior, helplessly. Fear, unmet needs, low self-esteem, and low maturity are contributing factors to becoming a conformer (Padilla et al., 2007; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Milosevic et al., 2019).

### ***Collude***

Colluders are those that follow and support the toxic leader willingly and intentionally. These Service members often discourage and/or punish peers who dissent and speak up and protect the toxic leader's image and success because often they see their own success tied to that of the leader. Researchers name ambition, similar worldviews, and bad values as factors that serve as motivators for colluders (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Padilla et al., 2007). For example, when a follower shares the same views and values as a leader, or they feel part of the same in-group as the leader, they are more likely to follow and support the leader and to see the leader's success as their own (Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007). In contrast, subordinates who are members of the out-group in relation to the leader are more likely to reject and challenge the leader.

### **Conducive Environments**

As previously mentioned, toxic leadership is not only a matter of leaders and subordinates, but also of environment. Organizational factors that can contribute to and enable the rise of toxic leadership are instability, perceived threat, organizational values/culture, ineffective institutions, and a lack of checks and balances (Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood, 2021). For example, toxic leaders in an unstable environment can easily

control and manipulate subordinates because people are more likely to follow leaders and authority figures when confronted with a threat or uncertainty (Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007).

Although some values found in military culture, such as collectivism, group loyalty, high power distance, and avoidance of uncertainty, can be of great help for mission readiness and success, they can also make it easier for toxic leaders to thrive because groups with these attributes are more likely to embrace such leaders (Padilla et al., 2007). Organizational factors like these can be problematic because they foster an environment that allows the toxicity to grow and spread. The toxic leader will continue to negatively influence more and more subordinates throughout their career, some of whom will replicate the toxic behaviors and, in turn, affect and influence more and more subordinates. When toxic leaders are seen succeeding, it can create the perception that toxic behaviors are a path to success and/or are condoned by the organization.

### **Negative Consequences & Effects**

A small number of toxic leaders can destroy the good work of countless people, precisely because their influence and harm can have rippling effects that expand beyond the people immediately under their influence and affect the overall climate. Indeed, studies have shown that people under the influence of bad leaders tend to emulate those behaviors and engage in them toward their subordinates (e.g., Padilla et al., 2007). This means that one toxic leader, by virtue of wrongly influencing future leaders, can have an indirect negative impact on those future leaders' subordinates, potentially long after their time as a leader has ended. For example, ADP 6-22 (Department of the Army, 2019) notes that prolonged use of counterproductive leadership destroys unit morale and trust as well as undermines the followers' commitment to the mission. Moreover, counterproductive leadership can also decrease task performance and



physical/psychological well-being as well as increase negative outcomes such as depression or burnout (e.g., Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007).

### ***Subordinates***

Toxic leadership and climates can have countless negative impacts on subordinates individually, which can include the quality of life and well-being of said individuals (Anderson, 2019; Akca, 2017; Babos & Rusu, 2020; Box, 2012; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo, 2017; Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007). For example, psychological, physiological, and professional harm may occur. Toxic leadership can impact a subordinates' self-confidence, leading to feelings of anxiety and frustration (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019). Toxic leadership can also lead to sleep and appetite problems for the subordinate (Toxic Leadership, 2019). In terms of professional harm, subordinates may suffer from a lack of motivation, which can create a barrier and a lack of commitment between themselves and the organization; in turn, subordinates may choose to pull back in their completion of work and begin to model negative behaviors in their roles (Milosevic et al., 2019).

### ***Organization***

Research shows that the effects of toxic leadership on organizational success are large, consistent, and highly interrelated, affecting every measurable dimension of performance (Anderson, 2019; Akca, 2017; Babos & Rusu, 2020; Box, 2012; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007). Therefore, the negative behaviors of a few can have a wide impact on the internal organization and on how the organization is perceived by the wider public. For example, within the organization, there may be higher turnover, a growing lack of trust and doubt, and workplace deviance. Outside the organization, the public may begin to experience distrust towards the organization as well, which

can lead to increased hesitancy to join the Armed Forces and lower enlistment rates among certain populations.

### **Military Connection to Toxic Leadership**

Although the military strives to enforce strong leadership, toxic leadership can still exist within the climate and culture. For example, Williams (2018) suggests that there is a high prevalence of toxic behaviors within the Department of Defense and the federal workforce, at large. U.S. Army officers and sergeants have observed and/or worked directly for a toxic leader (e.g., Jaffe, 2011), such that some individuals have even considered leaving their profession (e.g., Reed & Olsen, 2010). Research also indicates that a “significant relationship exists between perceived toxic leadership and organizational cynicism and that followers of toxic leaders are likely to have more negative attitudes toward their organization as a whole” (Dobbs & Do, 2019, p. 19). For example, Hannah et al. (2013) noted that individuals who were on the receiving end of toxic leadership not only demonstrated a lower level of moral courage, but identified less with the organization’s core values. These findings further indicate just how toxic leadership can negatively impact an entire organization. A report released in 2011 by the Center for Army Leadership indicates that “Army Service members rate abusive supervision higher than other occupational samples” (Steele, 2011, p. 10).

Research shows that effective diversity management from leadership is associated with higher organizational performance. “When an agency’s employees perceived that leaders managed racial diversity effectively, higher levels of racial diversity improved perceived organizational performance” (Choi & Rainey, 2010, p. 116). Moreover, “effective responses [to EO complaints] from the chain of command are associated with decreased emotional distress and increased retention intentions” (Daniel et al., 2019, p. 367). However, even with diversity and

inclusion training throughout an entire organization, change can only occur if adjustments are made to the organizational climate, starting with the top levels of leadership by establishing leadership accountability (Prieto et al., 2016).

### **Overview of Effective Leadership**

As noted in the literature (Anderson, 2019; Akca, 2017; Babos & Rusu, 2020; Box, 2012; Dagless, 2018; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo, et al., 2017; Luthans et al., 1998; Milosevic et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2007, Zenger & Folkman, 2021, 2022), actions can be taken to prevent toxic leadership. Providing advanced education and training for future leaders, screening and monitoring leaders for potential issues, and creating a culture that promotes and rewards positive leaders are just a few ways that the development of toxic leadership can be deterred. As noted by Retired ninth Sgt. Maj. of the Army Richard A. Kidd in the Army Leadership Field Manual, "Soldiers learn to be good leaders from good leaders" (as cited in NCO Journal Staff, 2018).

### **Effective Leadership Styles**

There are several common leadership styles that effective leaders may embody (e.g., NCO Journal Staff, 2018). For example, visionary strategic leadership focuses on leaders being proactive rather than reactive in their responses (Rainey, 2013). Transactional leadership focuses on structure, results, rewards, and penalties, whereas transformational leadership relies on leading by example and focuses on pushing followers into a growth mindset (e.g., Mazurek, 2022; NCO Journal Staff, 2018). Servant leadership focuses on meeting the needs of squads or teams (NCO Journal Staff, 2018) while also modelling followership by emphasizing mentoring direct reports through model behavior (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015). Democratic leadership empowers followers and involves stakeholders in decision making (Mazurek, 2022). Inclusive leadership centers the practice of inclusion (Ferdman & Deane, 2014) in a manner that

transforms mindsets, behaviors, and collective practices (Ferdman et al., 2020). In contrast are autocratic leadership and bureaucratic leadership. Autocratic leadership dictates directions, missions, and goals without input from others (NCO Journal Staff, 2018), and bureaucratic leadership focuses on rules and regulations in a top-down approach (Mazurek, 2022). Although each branch of Service has their own definition of leadership, which involves influencing others to accomplish a mission (Malik et al., 2016), in order to be considered effective, individuals must be able to adapt their leadership style to meet mission, personnel, and environmental demands.

### **Leadership Attributes, Perceptions, & Values**

The DoD emphasizes that attributes, such as honesty, loyalty, respect, fairness, etc., are conducive to effective leadership (e.g., DoD Directive 5500.07). For example, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22 notes that leaders need to have character, presence, and intellect (Department of the Army, 2019). According to Air Force Instruction (AFI) 1-2, successful commanders should lead by personal example, pay careful attention to the welfare and morale of their subordinates, and establish and maintain a healthy command climate that fosters good order, discipline, teamwork, cohesion, and trust (Department of the Air Force, 2014). In all examples, the concept of a good leader goes beyond mission and task-oriented requirements; the values and competencies highlighted speak to the treatment of subordinates and resulting climate. Thus, a balance must be maintained between short-term mission requirements and the health and development of subordinates, the organization, and climate in the long-term.

Research (e.g., Lipman-Blumen 2005, 2010) has shown that career officers value leadership perception, work facilitation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration in their leaders. In essence “the U.S. military needs people-focused leaders just as much as it needs effective, task-oriented leaders” to foster a culture that deters toxic leadership (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017, p. 17).

### **Preventing Toxic Leadership**

Effective leaders require advanced decision-making skills, informed by experience and self-awareness, as well as organizational and mission-critical knowledge (e.g., Hanser et al., 2008). Cultivating these skills and abilities in leaders beginning at the lowest ranks via targeted training and frequent assessment of behavior and judgement can decrease the formation of toxic habits (Baboş & Rusu, 2020). For example, Ihme and Sundstrom (2020) found that military leaders trained in mindfulness self-reported better transformational leadership behaviors, resilience, and perceived effectiveness. Therefore, providing training over leadership may help to improve leadership ability and help Service members recognize the attributes of an effective versus an ineffective or toxic leader (e.g., Dobbs & Do, 2019).

### **Delivery & Creation**

The creation of leadership education can vary across industries. For example, academia typically utilizes leadership training via curriculum, whether that be through separate modules, overall coursework, or degrees (Naudé, 2017), whereas corporate universities tend to focus on delivering training and development to organizations by partnering with the organization's senior leadership (Kolo et al., 2017). Leadership education can also vary across modality and platform, as different platforms may match different goals and collaboration efforts (Williamson & Blackburn, 2020). Regardless of how leadership education is implemented, leaders attending the sessions must walk away from training with context comprehension and understanding of how organizations work systematically (e.g., Keeshan & Chetty, 2017).

As it currently stands, most leadership development is currently 10% classroom/formal training, 20% coaching, and 70% experiential activities and assignments (Loew & Garr, 2011, as cited in Odendaal, 2017). Therefore, the activities and assignments selected for leadership

education and development should be reflective and applicable to the individual; examples include:

- Introduction assignments (e.g., Hurtwitz, 2017)
- On-the-job training and exercises to practice job function, which could include standard emails/memos that need to be prioritized (e.g., Taylor & Vorster, 2017)
- Case studies: responding to particular situations or dilemmas (e.g., Taylor & Vorster, 2017)
- Self-reflections or journals (e.g., Hurtwiz & Hurtwitz, 2020)
- Role play activities: interacting with person posing as client or colleague (e.g., Taylor & Vorster, 2017)
- Presentations: presenting to panel on job-specific topic (e.g., Taylor & Vorster, 2017)
- Various group activities: leaderless group discussions (e.g., Hurtwiz & Hurtwitz, 2020; Taylor & Vorster, 2017)
- 360-degree assessments (e.g., Allen et al., 2022)

Training leaders to understand the impact of their actions on subordinates is just one method of addressing toxic leadership; to better address toxic leadership, training and education should be tailored to the specific level of the leader. Developmental education congregated around rank and positional transitions should include an assessment of toxic pitfalls to prepare individuals for increased responsibilities and raise their overall self-awareness of toxic behaviors (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017). For example, there are differences between a frontline leader and a senior leader. A frontline leader typically has direct contact with employees (Schwatka et al., 2019) and ensures that innovation takes place with employees

(Mohamed, 2021). Senior leaders are typically considered upper management and are often responsible for tasks such as planning, budgeting, or organization (e.g., Reimer et al., 2018). To be effective, senior leaders must employ the right leadership style for their goals, exercise good judgment, and motivate their subordinates (e.g., Hanser et al., 2008; Mohamed, 2021).

Additionally, senior leaders need to ensure that mission alignment takes place in order to see a return on investment with regards to diversity and inclusion. In essence, when material is tailored for situations that personnel might encounter in their responsibilities at their current rank, it can better serve them as leaders, which can enable them to better serve their organization.

According to Odierno (2015), “leader development is achieved through the career-long synthesis of training, education, and experience. It is fostered in the institutional (schools and courses), operational (duty assignments), and self-development (selected activities) domains, supported by peer and developmental relationships” (p. 10). Therefore, leaders must not only continually engage in training and education, but also continuously self-develop. As such, continuous training and education should take place throughout an officer’s career, as it serves to reinforce core Service values outside of established professional military education channels to create a healthier culture (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017). Additionally, annual training must occur. According to Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo, et al. (2017), annual training must emphasize collective ownership, leverage the peer influence of opinion leaders, and create an open forum for feedback that initiates change when needed. Senior military leaders must stress reoccurring assessment systems at every annual training session (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017).

### **Focus**

Education and training should promote ethical and moral behavior through policies and visible enforcement, as this can help deter unethical and destructive activities (Padilla et al.,

2007). Moreover, education and training can enable leaders to improve their self-awareness, which can help build emotional intelligence for leadership roles.

One method that can create effective leaders is the coaching model. The coaching model is a “collaborative relationship formed between coach and coachee for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes which are valued by the coachee” (Grant et al., 2010, p. 3, as cited in Odendaal, 2017). A coach serves to create a welcoming environment, helping individuals identify their own goals in order to support the organizational goals, listening, asking questions, and providing feedback (Williamson & Blackburn, 2020). In essence, leadership coaching focuses on effective leadership as the main achievement outcome (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014, as cited in Odendaal, 2017). By providing coaching, or mentorship, leadership can shift from reactive to proactive (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017).

Research indicates that leadership training and education should emphasize ethical behavior and judgement in leadership training (e.g., Baboş & Rusu, 2020; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Zenger & Folkman, 2022). Additionally, leadership training and education should focus on developing programs that focus on rising stars as they transition into their new leadership roles to minimize the impact of toxic characteristics; it is important for leadership training and education to identify and eliminate fatal flaws in order to screen out potentially toxic leaders, which is critical to curtailing toxic leadership (e.g., Baboş & Rusu, 2020; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017; Zenger and Folkman, 2022).

### **Evaluation**

Establishing clearly defined competencies for learning outcomes, based on the organization’s ideal leadership qualities, can guide leader identification and development. One type of performance review that accomplishes that goal is the 360-degree feedback. 360-degree feedback is comprehensive (e.g., includes employees, employers, self-evaluation, etc.) in that it



provides more-well rounded feedback on an employee's performance than a traditional top-down performance review (Indeed, 2020). Providing 360-degree feedback throughout an officer's career can help developing leaders understand the need for emotional intelligence (Dagless, 2018; Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo, et al., 2017) as well as support leaders in identifying their own harmful behaviors and opportunities for correcting these behaviors (Hardison et al., 2015, as cited in Dobbs & Do, 2019). Research suggests that "360-degree feedback data collected with a psychometrically valid and well-constructed assessment is predictive of who will ultimately be the most effective leaders" (Zenger & Folkman, 2022).

The U.S. military has begun to solicit 360-degree feedback by implementing a Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback tool (MSAF 360), which relies on confidential feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors to inform a leader of their strengths and weaknesses (Dagless, 2018). When MSAF 360 identifies a weakness, it provides coaching resources to improve leadership perception and performance (Dagless, 2018). Giving supervisory leaders access to this data would enable them to intervene early in the careers of subordinate leaders to correct behaviors. If that guidance did not modify the toxic leader's behavior, and their actions continued to violate organizational values, customs, and norms, the assessment score would provide a starting point for evaluation of the readiness of the toxic leader in question for future leadership roles. Adopting this 360-degree initiative will allow the U.S. military to become more proactive in countering toxic leadership while promoting transparency and accountability (Dagless, 2018). Moreover, having a leadership assessment score that covers the length of an officer's career would give the U.S. military an opportunity to identify toxic behaviors and ensure that the right leaders achieve the high honor of leading America's sons and daughters. Equally important, adopting the leadership assessment score ensures the early identification of

potential toxic leaders, when the impact of their toxicity is less severe, and when coaching and mentoring by superiors can still prevent their toxicity from derailing their careers.

Another method to solicit 360-degree feedback would be through senior rater counseling, especially as it can accomplish “what the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback system was supposed to do, without the massive expenditure of funding or need to connect to the internet.” (Young, 2019, p. 8). Moreover, senior rater counseling is justified by Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22: Army Leadership, Army Techniques Publication 6-22.1: The Counseling Process, and the Army Regulation 623-3: Evaluation Reporting System (Young, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

As noted in ADP 6-22, “Being a leader is not about giving orders; it’s about earning respect, leading by example, creating a positive climate, maximizing resources, inspiring others, and building teams to promote excellence...Soldiers trust their leaders. Leaders must never break that trust, as trust is the bedrock of the military profession.” (Department of the Army, 2019). Toxic leaders, through their negative behaviors, break that trust. Therefore, senior leaders must be willing to remove destructive leaders from their roles to show that the feedback process is working effectively (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017). This action will send the message that the organization does not condone those behaviors and that subordinates should not take them as role models and imitate them (Fernandez de Bobadilla Lorenzo et al., 2017).

Creating an organizational culture that sustains trust in leaders requires an understanding of the causes of toxic leadership and implementation of actions and initiatives that deter and reduce its occurrence. Targeted education and training that guides the selection of leaders and prepares leaders for transitions to these roles can reduce behaviors associated with toxic leadership. As

noted in the literature cited above, consistent practices that protect subordinates who report toxic leaders as well as actions that remove, rather than reward, toxic leadership behaviors, will, ultimately, improve the effectiveness of military teams and enhance overall mission outcomes across the board.

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### **Appendix: Suggested Activities**

PRIOR TO ANY AND ALL USE OF THE ACTIVITIES IN THIS APPENDIX, PLEASE VERIFY THAT AUTHOR/OWNER PERMISSION IS OBTAINED WHERE NEEDED AND THAT USE OF THE MATERIALS DOES NOT RESULT IN COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT.

#### **Introduction Activity**

Hurwitz (2017) presented an introduction activity in which individuals were paired up with the instruction that they would later be introducing their partner to the rest of the group. Participants were instructed to learn their partner's name and a unique strength their partner possesses. When it was time to introduce their partners, participants were told that in the interest of time, they should only share their partner's name and if they believe their partner would be a better leader or follower – without providing a reason for their opinion. Participants were then told to stand in groups of followers. This typically exposes a bias towards leadership, with the followership group being much smaller than the leadership group. This experiential learning activity then serves as a starting point to discuss labels and biases related to leadership and followership. During the debriefing participants are given an opportunity to reflect on the interplay of followership and leadership and how both concepts are vital to effective leadership in any organizational structure.

This activity can be followed with small breakout groups discussing reflective questions on leadership development, such as:

- “What would it look like to take initiative and accountability for your own professional development and performance development?” (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2020)

- “In what ways might you develop “organizational agility” and be in the best position to represent your leader, and to be their true thinking partner?” (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2020)

### **Self-Reflection Exercises**

Another suggested activity by Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2020) includes a series of journal prompts/self-reflection questions that can be utilized for leadership development. Self-reflection is an important aspect of identifying and mitigating toxic leadership, especially if it is being perpetuated by people present in the training. The below questions were adapted for military settings.

- How would you describe the culture of your organization? How would you describe your organizational culture to someone outside of the organization?
- What strategies and actions are you employing or might you employ to feel like you fit in and feel like part of the team and the organization?
- What strategies and actions are you employing or might you employ to ensure others in your organization experience a sense of belonging?
- What good advice have you received from your leadership, coaches, or mentors that impacted your own leadership development?

Such questions can be responded to in discussion or in independent journaling activities by participants or both. Additional questions could be asked to participants to facilitate the reflection process, such as “Have you observed toxic leadership during your time in this organization?” and “Do you think you have ever displayed any toxic traits?”.

### ***Visualizing Followership***

Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2020) also suggest a visualization activity during which participants draw their conceptualization of followership followed by small group discussions that explore the value of followership.

### **Case Studies/Scenarios/Role Plays**

Case studies and scenarios are an interactive way of helping individuals apply knowledge they have about toxic leadership to real world scenarios (e.g., Taylor & Vorster, 2017). Any scenarios need to be modified and adapted for use with the CTAS audience. Below are a few scenarios from various sources that could be adapted for military, either in the form of case study/scenario discussions or constructed into role play scenarios.

#### ***Case Study 1***

Satiani and Satiani (2022) present a case study of a physician that displays toxic leadership behavior illustrating how one can recognize and manage such behavior while also outlining the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on organizational climate and the organization at large. Participants could review this article and subsequently discuss questions such as:

- What are the costs of toxic leadership? To the individual? To the organization?
- What are warning signs of toxic leadership?
- How would you aim to prevent toxic leadership in your organization? How would you respond to toxic leadership in your organization?

*Case Study 2*

Colonel George E. Reed, Ph.D., U.S. Army, Retired, and Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. Olsen, D. Min., U.S. Army, Retired (2010) discuss toxic leadership and its devastating consequences in the military. The below excerpt can serve as a starting point for discussion:

Two recent cases drawn from media reports serve to demonstrate the problem of toxic leadership in stark detail. The Army Times reported a case of misuse of authority by four noncommissioned officers in Iraq that resulted in at least two court martial convictions for cruelty and maltreatment. In this case, a group of sergeants allegedly engaged in a campaign of “verbal abuse, physical punishment, and ridicule of other Soldiers.” The investigation was initiated because of the death of a private who was in the unit only 10 days before he committed suicide. In another case, a Navy captain was relieved of duty for cruelty and maltreatment of her crew. According to a report by Time, “her removal has generated cheers from those who had served with her since she graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1985.” This latter case is useful for pointing out the degree to which members hold the organization accountable for toxic leaders. While an investigation by the Navy’s Inspector General documented many instances of humiliation, “even greater anger seems directed at the Navy brass for promoting such an officer to positions of ever-increasing responsibility.” Both of these cases were extreme examples where the chain of command eventually acted. In the former case, however, it was not the unit climate but the death of a Soldier that prompted the inquiry. In the latter case, a pattern of perceived abuse resulted in a series of anonymous complaints from the crew that prompted the command to investigate. In light of the findings of the Army War

College and CGSC studies, we suggest that much toxic behavior in military units goes undetected or without organizational response (p.61).

Suggested discussion questions:

- How can extreme instances of toxic leadership behavior be prevented?
- Can you think of early warning signs of toxic leadership in your command?
- How can you create organizational accountability to avoid toxic leadership behavior in your organization?

***Other Materials and Activities for Exploration***

- LinkedIn Toxic Military Exercises: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-deal-toxic-leaders-short-exercise-mark-johnson-gaicd->
- Harvard Business Review Advice on Coaching Toxic Leaders:  
<https://hbr.org/2014/04/coaching-the-toxic-leader>
- On Dec 5, a new book is being released entitled *Toxic Leadership: Research and Cases* that could provide valuable case studies and interventions.  
<https://www.routledge.com/Toxic-Leadership-Research-and-Cases/Walker-Watkins/p/book/9781032064611>