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Toxic Leadership

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Toxic leaders come in various sizes and shapes, but two key dimensions—*behavior* and *personal characteristics*—will help us categorize and analyze them. First, toxic leaders engage in seriously *destructive behaviors;* and, second, they exhibit *dysfunctional personal qualities*. Together, their actions and character concoct a deadly brew of significant and sustained injury. Because an exhaustive list of either dimension is not possible in the space allotted, let us focus on the critical elements of each.

Destructive Behaviors

The *destructive behavior* of toxic leaders takes many forms. The "quick and dirty" telltale mark of toxic leaders is: They leave their followers decidedly worse off than they found them. Toxic leaders wreak profound and lasting damage by physically, emotionally, and/or sexually abusing by bullying, "undermining, demeaning, seducing, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, disenfranchising, incapacitating, imprisoning, torturing, terrorizing, or killing" those they intend to control, as well as innocent bystanders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 19). These and other unethical and illegal acts are the everyday behaviors of toxic leaders.

In addition, toxic leaders commonly engage in one or more of the following behaviors:

- Violate generally accepted standards of human rights, including setting limits on free speech, religion, assembly, and travel
- "Feed their followers illusions that enhance leaders' power and impair the followers' capacity to act independently," often by convincing their needy followers that they alone can protect the followers from harm and help them achieve heroism and immortality (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 19)
- Manipulate the followers' deepest fears and needs
- Suppress all criticism and insist on compliance with their decisions and actions by using threats and authoritarian sanctions if necessary
- Deceive and deliberately misdiagnose situations and challenges
- Undermine institutions, norms, rules, and processes designed to support truth, justice, freedom, and excellence
- Cling improperly to power by illegally extending their tenure and obstructing and/or refusing to nurture or acknowledge successors
- Build totalitarian regimes or dynasties
- "Set constituents against one another" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 20)
- Train their followers to scapegoat, shun, hate, and/or destroy others
- Mistreat the weakest followers while lavishing blandishments and benefits on the strongest
- Ensure their power by "structuring the costs of overthrowing them as a trigger for the downfall of the system" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 20)
- Utilize scarce resources for their personal ends instead of addressing followers' legitimate needs
- Ignore the plight of their followers in the aftermath of crises
- Disregard and/or support incompetence of others, cronyism, and/or corruption
- Act with incompetence that injures their followers and the organizations in which they participate

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Clearly, the behavior of toxic leaders is highly complicated. To add to that complexity, these destructive leaders do not necessarily act in a consistently toxic manner. In fact, they are rarely toxic *all* of the time, in *all* circumstances, or with *all* individuals and groups.

Toxic leaders may engage in toxic behavior in certain public situations but not in others. Under virtually identical circumstances, the same toxic leader may act toxically in one instance but not in another. Some, such as Nazi Chancellor Adolf Hitler, beguile their victims with blinding charisma, deliberately drawing them into their intentionally toxic agendas. Others operate malevolently below their victims' angle of vision. In other cases, initially nontoxic leaders gradually turn toxic, making it difficult for followers to detect the change. Still others confront circumstances so far beyond their talents and benign intentions that neither they nor their followers understand the enormity of the damage they will ultimately inflict.

Toxic leaders may display their negative qualities and behavior only in private, obscuring the serious implications that their private conduct and character have for their public role. The highly complex and diverse behavior of toxic leaders may be subtle under certain circumstances and blatant in others. Not surprisingly, then, one person may perceive another's toxic leader as his or her heroic savior.

Dysfunctional Personal Qualities

The second dimension of toxic leadership involves the *dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics* of toxic leaders. Here, too, the list is long, so let's consider only the most central qualities that toxic leaders may display:

- Lack of integrity that reveals them as hypocritical, untrustworthy, cynical, or corrupt
- "Ambition that prompts leaders to put their own sustained power, glory, and fortunes above their followers' needs" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 21)
- "Enormous egos that blind them to (their own) shortcomings and limit their capacity for self-renewal" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 21)
- Arrogance that prevents them from recognizing and acknowledging their mistakes and predisposes them to blame others
- Amorality that undermines their ability to differentiate between right and wrong
- Avarice that prompts them to value money above most other things
- Recklessness and self-centeredness that makes them disregard the costs of their toxic actions to others
- Cowardice that prompts them to avoid difficult choices and consequences
- Inability to comprehend the nature and implications of key problems

Any of these dysfunctional personal qualities can push leaders into toxic territory. Worse yet, various combinations of these characteristics can prove positively lethal to any hapless individual or group that becomes their target.

Intention, Intensity, Interim (Duration), and Impact

Four other dimensions of toxic leadership are relevant: the toxic leader's *intention*, the *intensity* of the leader's toxic action, the *interim* (or *duration*) of the toxicity, and the *impact* or *effect* (including *severity* and *range*) of the toxicity. These dimensions usually prove difficult to disentangle empirically, but they function as crucial factors nonetheless. Next, each of these aspects will be individually addressed.

Intention

Intention spans a continuum from *unintentional* to *intentional*. Intentional toxic behavior, whereby a leader deliberately injures others, is obviously more blameworthy than unintended toxic action, which, nonetheless, can leave serious destruction in its wake.

A case in point: Chairman Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and his Cultural Revolution spanned a quarter of a century. During that time, Mao and his elite troops controlled the fates of nearly a billion Chinese citizens far flung over nine million square kilometers. Although Mao originally intended to improve the lives of his followers, each failure goaded the frustrated leader into more extreme and eventually deliberately toxic measures. By conservative estimates, Mao and his Red Guard ultimately caused the deaths of more than 30 million of their own citizens. The official damage assessment does not count an older cohort, already educated and professionally trained, whom Mao sent into the countryside to work the fields. Nor does the official calculus measure the damage incurred by stunting knowledge and research desperately needed for the future development of his country. Mao's toxic actions suggest a lack of respect for the sanctity of individual human life that enables some toxic leaders to believe that the end justifies the means. Max Weber, of course, insisted that an ethos of responsibility for the intended and reasonably foreseeable consequences of our actions is an essential part of a vocation for politics (Weber, 1958).[1]

Unintended toxic action may include a leader's incompetence and ignorance, lack of attention to the followers and the situation, and/or reckless disregard for the well-being of the followers. Cowardice, too, can play a role in the unintended toxic actions of a leader.

Intensity

The degree of *intensity* that characterizes a leader's toxic action is important, because, by our definition, toxic action must result in "serious and enduring harm" to others. Measured on a continuum from *very mild* to *very intense*, actions that fall between the midrange or "moderate" level

and the "very intense" endpoint of the continuum constitute toxic behavior.

Interim (or Duration)

Interim or *duration* provides a crosscutting dimension, because an enduring toxic action (one lasting for long periods of time) is more likely to inflict more serious harm than most short-term actions. Thus, we would expect that years of imprisonment in a concentration camp would impose more trauma than two nights in a military jail. In some cases, however, intensity can override duration. For example, a very intense, short-term toxic action, such as physical torture during that two-night stay in the military jail, could produce severe, long-lasting effects.

Impact (or Range)

Impact or range refers to the number of lives, careers, and fortunes affected. It also includes damage to organizations, institutions, the environment, and even nations. Impact considers the toxic effects that spread from one sector of society to another. Combined with intensity and duration, impact helps us estimate the breadth of the toxic results. Not only primary, but secondary and tertiary effects, difficult as they may be to calculate, take their toll as well.

Because these are imperfect measures at best, the total impact of toxic leadership is always difficult to assess. Moreover, how are we to compare the complex negative effects of toxic leaders in different societal sectors and at different moments in history?

For example, how should we evaluate the 25-year span of Mao's nationwide reign against Enron CEO Ken Lay's 5-year off-and-on-again corporate tenure? Ken Lay's leadership, with the toxic help of Jeffrey Skilling, demolished both Enron and the famed accounting firm Arthur Andersen. Five thousand people lost their jobs at Enron; and 28,000 jobs were lost at Arthur Anderson. Countless careers were destroyed, and innumerable retirement accounts of employees and stockholders were decimated.

One more example: What was the net effect of financier Bernie Madoff's toxic leadership, given that, for decades, he rewarded investors with artificially inflated earnings (taxes on which affected government coffers) that eventually spiraled into financial wipeout? Billions of dollars were lost in the financial tsunami that engulfed individuals, corporations, and foundations.

Still, these corporate catastrophes ordinarily are dwarfed by the impact of long-reigning political toxic leaders, such as Hitler, Mao, and Joseph Stalin, who infamously annihilated millions of people they viewed as enemies or pollutants. In these monumental cases of toxic leadership, there is no easy way to compute the numbers, particularly when each life counts immeasurably if it happens to be yours.

Our dismay about toxic leaders should not be read as an unrealistic call for plaster saints. When we are dealing with human leaders, it is folly to expect perfection. Besides, the need to forgive others as well as ourselves seasons the human condition. Nonetheless, those who wish to assume the special responsibilities of leadership must be willing to measure their own behavior against a higher standard, one that sets the example for those they aim to lead.

Why Do We Follow Toxic Leaders?

The often-cited truism, "there are no leaders without followers," assumes ominous significance when we consider toxic leaders. It raises a serious question that we followers ignore at our peril: Why, in fact, do followers tolerate, often prefer (and sometimes even create) toxic leaders and, in many cases, for long periods of time?

The question may be deceptively simple, but the answer involves a highly complex web of factors. Human psychological and existential needs, historical and cultural traditions, the ebbs and flows of political and social life, the strictures of religion and other ideologies, the force of institutions and their governing bodies, along with the media, all conjoin to quell our resistance to toxic leaders. When crises threaten to overwhelm us, we feel the special magnetic pull of these leaders, who promise to protect us in dangerous times and set things right (e.g., Lipman-Blumen, 2001, 2002, 2008). We also feel the constraints of our *conscious rationalizations* ("I *cannot* because . . .") for not resisting toxic leaders. Add to those our *unconscious internalized norms* ("I *should not* because . . ."), powerful "control myths" by which we restrict our own behavior (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Due to space limitations, the focus will be on just two sets of drivers, those over which we have the greatest, if not complete, control. These are the *existential* and *psychological* factors that induce followers to allow toxic leaders to have their way with them (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

The Existential Dilemma

Unlike the subterranean termite, we *Homo sapiens* are keenly aware that our lives are finite. We know that we all ultimately die. This is the one painful certainty on which we can depend. Yet, unless we choose to take our own lives, none of us can predict the exact time or circumstances of our demise.

Denial and paranoia are two possible reactions to the anxiety and dread that keep company with this *existential* dilemma. There is still another very human response: Seek out leaders who vow to keep us safe and, better yet, who promise us eternal life or immortality. Immortality comes in several guises. For some, immortality is a future life, replete with culinary and sexual delights in a paradisiacal hereafter. For others, such as Napoleon, immortality is the memories of our deeds emblazoned on the minds of future generations.

Leaders who create the illusion that, by their omniscience and omnipotence, they can protect us from all

harm, even death, easily attract followers. Those leaders who convince us that joining their parade will guarantee us eternal life are quite irresistible. Hitler's Thousand Year Reich offers a dramatic example of such an illusory "immortality project" (Becker, 1973; Rank, 1961). On a very different scale, the toxic CEOs who brought down the giant U.S. financial institutions in September 2008 were dream merchants in their own right. Toxic leaders use illusions to blunt the pain of living in an unpredictable world, where a random event on any sunny September morning can unravel the fabric of our lives.

Leaders who present themselves as our saviors usually entice us to help them achieve their "noble vision." They introduce their enterprises as our ticket to immortality. Toxic leaders commonly disguise these grandiose illusions as righteous crusades, designed to eliminate a contaminating menace. Purifying the world is a task, they assure us, worthy of immortality.

On closer inspection, we usually discover the targeted group is simply different from our own. Sometimes, that group may be one that we, too, secretly dislike or fear. The identity of the stigmatized group may change from one era and context to the next. Jews, Christians, Muslims, homosexuals, Communists, capitalists, and Gypsies may serve as the target in one era. African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Tutsis, Georgians, perhaps our major business competitor, or simply a rival soccer team may become the despised group in another time and place. Toxic leaders tend to bedazzle us with their promises of good fortune and immortality so that we fail to notice the destructiveness of their extravagant illusions camouflaged as noble visions (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Another crucial part of our existential dilemma stems from our deep longing to understand the meaning of our lives. Embedded in that yearning is the need to feel we are significant beings in a meaningful world, as Ernest Becker, Otto Rank, and Søren Kierkegaard all understood (Becker, 1973, 1975; Kierkegaard, 1959, 1968; Rank, 1961, 1968). Identifying a "holy grail" for us to seek is one way that leaders help us perceive our lives as meaningful. To satisfy our quest for the meaning of our lives, toxic leaders also offer us a ringside seat at the center of action. There, mingling with the "movers and shakers," we sense the thrill at the world's epicenter. There, we witness the alchemy of crucial decisions that affect our own and others' lives. Participating in events at the center of action infuses us with a sense of significance. It also creates an illusion of control over our own and others' lives played out in this uncertain and rapidly changing world.

Knowledge, particularly new knowledge, tends to reside at the center where the cognoscenti congregate. New knowledge, of course, is another means of exerting control over our own fragile lives and extending our power over others. Being "up" on the latest scientific, political, technological, artistic, financial, military, and even fashion knowledge creates an aura of meaningfulness as well. We rarely consider that this new knowledge may simply be the latest illusion that eventually will be swept away when still newer information and understanding eventually prove the current paradigm wrong, as Thomas Kuhn so eloquently described (Kuhn, 1962).

Psychological Factors

In addition to the existential forces, certain *psychological* factors heighten our susceptibility to toxic leaders. Next, the most important psychological drivers will be addressed (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Authority Figures and Our Need for Security

Despite our childhood desire to escape the bonds of parental authority, our early socialization leaves a strong imprint long after our parents have relinquished that role. Early experiences with parents and other authority figures, such as teachers and clergy, intimidate us. These authority figures display seemingly inordinate power that cuts both ways: It can protect us from harm but also punish us for disobedience.

When we meet a leader who plays that familiar authoritarian tune we learned in childhood, we find ourselves humming along. Soon, we are singing aloud responsively, even enthusiastically, without necessarily recognizing the trap into which we are about to fall.

Historically, individuals unmoored from societal constraints have eagerly forgone their freedom in exchange for a new set of equally or more constraining roles, responsibilities, and rights that offers direction, security, and relief from anxiety.[2] The sequence of individual human development follows a surprisingly similar course as we move from youth through adolescence to adulthood. This process makes authority figures astonishingly attractive to us deep in our unconscious, even though we consciously believe we are seeking our independence. Toxic leaders, adept at strumming our need for certainty and other insecurities, have little difficulty attracting followers, even at the expense of their very freedom and independence.

Our Need to Feel Chosen

The need to feel "chosen" probably haunted even Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.[3] All elite groups—whether they are Harvard graduates, Navy Seals, Supreme Court justices, or born-again religionists—enjoy the special privileges of the "chosen." At the individual level, yearning to be their parents' "chosen" lies at the heart of sibling rivalry, unabated since the biblical conflict between Jacob and Esau.

Toxic leaders reassure their followers that they are the "chosen" through special privileges and protections. This, of course, conditions the chosen to disprize the "nonchosen" or the undesirable "Other." The we/they dichotomy, on which most toxic leaders play, draws the followers closer to a leader. It also creates strong internal bonds

within the group and focuses the group's aggression externally on the now-feared and hated outsiders.

Toxic leaders routinely insist that their followers must seek glory by absorbing or eliminating the nonchosen (Love, 1989). They urge their followers to convert the nonchosen to their point of view or alternatively simply destroy them. Ernest Becker and Otto Rank argue that persuading others that our beliefs, products, and institutions are the best is truly a matter of life or death, with our claim to immortality at stake.

> In each historical period . . . man thought that he lived absolute truth because his social life gave expression to his deepest innate hunger. And so Rank could say, "Every conflict over truths . . . is just the same old struggle over . . . immortality." . . . [T]ry to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes. (Becker, 1975, p. 87)

Need for Membership in the Human Community and Fear of Ostracism, Isolation, and Social Death

As Plato noted in the *Republic*, humans are "social animals," with a deep need to be part of the community, while still, paradoxically, cherishing their individuality. Most psychologists would argue that one cannot be truly human without belonging to some community. Our community shapes us, even distorts us, to conform to its own requirements. That same community also provides us with security, meaning, sanity, and value.

One proof of our need for community can be seen in the lengths to which we willingly go to avoid the community's worst punishment, that is, exile or "social death" (Alford, 2001). We learn from experience and example that our membership in the group is worth virtually any sacrifice. Not surprisingly, we see frantic followers forfeiting their individuality, their belief system, their freedom, and, for some, even their integrity to remain part of the group. Moreover, if we discover that our group is the "chosen," the very best of all groups, then we cleave to it ever more tightly.

The fear of ostracism or, worse yet, banishment from the group is immense because we understand such exile as social death. And though we can imagine all kinds of beatific, idyllic outcomes following our physical death, we know from real life that exile from our group is more fearsome than any other living arrangement. It is a small wonder that misbehaving children dread being sent to their rooms for a "time out" almost as much as prison inmates abhor solitary confinement.

Thus, we cling to the toxic leader's group, even when we are not totally in "sync" with that leader's beliefs and methods. Being part of the group—sometimes any group—is preferable to being sent away, like the proverbial scapegoat our ancestors drove out of the community, symbolically bearing all our sins.

On occasion, some members are compelled by conscience to take up the role of whistle-blower, to disavow the actions and practices of a toxic leader. Despite protective legislation, whistle-blowers still risk ostracism and exile from their group. This occurs even when the whistle-blower is speaking on behalf of more silently agreeing members.[4]

Fear of Personal Powerlessness vis-à-vis Toxic Leaders

Our sense of personal impotence vis-à-vis toxic leaders is another factor that drives us to surrender without protest. When we believe we are the sole dissenter, we quietly adapt to the demands of toxic leaders, changing ourselves rather than challenging them. Research has shown that the awareness of a single ally can embolden a dissenter to speak the truth (Asch, 1956, 1972; Sherif, 1972). Unfortunately, everyone's silence masks the discontent.

Le Bon (2002) proposed that, as members of a crowd, we relinquish our personal responsibility. However, as solo individuals, our conscience guides our choices, but once we join even a relatively small group, we rely on other members to act on our behalf. We tend to look to more senior, more powerful group members to resist the toxic leader. When they do not step forward, our personal confidence is further undermined, and our reluctance to protest only increases.

Self-Esteem, Opportunities for Heroism, and Our Uncritical Acceptance of Toxic Leaders

Our self-esteem emerges through our constant interaction in society. We develop an image of our "looking-glass selves" largely from the opinion of others, as sociologists C. H. Cooley and G. H. Mead described (Cooley, 1955, 1998; Mead, 1962). Every day that we pit our knowledge, skills, personality, and other resources against the challenges we confront, we and others evaluate the outcome against our society's standard of achievement.

When we measure up to society's achievement yardstick, our self-esteem grows. When we exceed it, we may even gain the status of hero, possibly one acclaimed in future history books. Others look to us as leaders in our particular field, even as opinion leaders on matters far removed from our area of expertise.

When we fail to meet the achievement standard society sets for us, our self-esteem plummets. Neither we nor others look to us as leaders. In fact, when we see others succeed where we have failed, or perhaps not even attempted, we tend to regard those outstanding individuals as our leaders. Becoming their follower is one way of sharing in the accomplishments and leadership journeys of these heroes. Simultaneously, we vicariously bolster our self-esteem.

We tend to regard such hero-leaders uncritically because we perceive them as demonstrably superior to ourselves. When these leaders engage in toxic behavior, our uncritical admiration, joined by our fear of challenging them, prompts us to accept whatever they present to us. Consequently, we tend not only to tolerate but even to adulate these toxic leaders.

Strategies for Escaping Toxic Leaders

Given the prevalence and magnetic allure of toxic leaders, along with the powerful individual and societal forces drawing followers into their orbit, what, if any, possibilities exist for escaping these destructive leaders? At least three types of strategies are needed for this complex undertaking: *preparatory, organizational*, and *individual and/or group* strategies (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Preparatory Strategies

Because toxic leaders play strongly to our deepest existential and psychological needs, developing strategies that prepare us psychologically and spiritually for this difficult undertaking is an appropriate place to start. In addition, changing oneself, demanding as that may be, is always easier than changing others or society at large. The first three preparatory strategies involve generalized mental preparation to avoid and/or build one's individual resistance to toxic leaders. They are particularly relevant in the processes associated with active citizenship, including, but not limited to, voting, vigorous involvement in a political party, and participation in civic organizations, be they nonpartisan, advocacy, or both.

Forgoing Illusions and Facing Reality and Anxiety

Embracing the illusions that toxic leaders dispense quiets followers' fears and anxieties but at a great price: the followers' own growth, independence, and creativity. By sheltering themselves under the dark wings of toxic leaders, followers avoid facing and coping with the hard realities of life. They remain infantilized, impeding their own path to maturity, independence, and resilience. Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas (2002) remind us that wise leaders find their strength, and often their direction as well, in the life crucibles they are forced to endure.

Because reality is inevitably encumbered by both infinite possibilities and dangers, confronting our daily world generates anxiety. Anxiety, however, serves multiple purposes. It shakes us up, alerts us to dangers, and pulsates as we begin to change (Freud, 1936). Facing reality and the anxiety that it provokes also helps us develop maturity and confidence. Looking reality in the eye opens the door to hope, deeper understanding, and creativity. It offers much more besides, as Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss (2001) understood:

> the "existential" environment, that is . . . the world or universe, . . . [is] the framework of existence: an environment of anxiety and hope in which one must find freedom and peace of mind, roles, and identities, faith in oneself, dignity, meaning, and purpose. (p. 26)

So, enrolling in what Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1959) called "the school of anxiety" is essential to learning how to connect to our very identity, creativity, resilience, and maturity. Anxiety goads us into crafting our own identity and expanding our authenticity. It is one path to finding the central meaning of our life. Armed with a deepened sense of self, understanding, purpose, and maturity, we can find the confidence to forgo the false shelter provided by toxic leaders.

Anxiety is often ignited by *external* dangers and social change. In turn, anxiety stimulates *internal* psychological and cognitive change. When this happens, we begin to see and think differently. In this "unfrozen" state, as Kurt Lewin (1952) described, we are more open to experimentation and new ideas. This may be a difficult approach, but the rewards are bountiful. This unfrozen state allows us to undertake new strategies for confronting, reforming, or overthrowing toxic leaders.

Demanding Leaders Who "Dis-illusion" Us and the "Valuable Inconvenience of Leadership": From Followership to Constituency

Once we have grown in confidence and maturity, we find it somewhat easier to work with, even demand, leaders who refuse to peddle illusions of safety and immortality. In fact, having learned to deal with our fears and anxieties, we can seek out leaders who even puncture the illusions we have created for ourselves.

Then we can experience the exhilaration of working with leaders who insist that we share the burden of leadership responsibilities. These "dis-illusioning" leaders insist that we undertake the "valuable inconvenience of leadership," wherein we set aside some of our own favorite pastimes and comforts to shoulder, inconveniently perhaps, important responsibilities for the group (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). In this way, we increase our own leadership abilities and reduce a leader's power over us. We make the transition from passive followers, who simply implement the ideas and directions of another, to active constituents, who help develop important ideas and policies and create structures that give them form.[5]

Kicking the Vision Habit and the "We/They Dichotomy"

Looking to leaders to provide *their* vision for the future is an exercise in self-infantilization. Instead, looking to ourselves to formulate the future *we* want forces us to think through the challenges we face. It also helps us to summon the "reluctant leader" within each of us, whose hesitancy notwithstanding has much to offer.

Connecting our vision to the vision of other people can enhance both our own and their leadership capacities (Lipman-Blumen, 2000). This strategy offers a fruitful way for constituents to participate in shaping their own future without waiting for leaders to impose their vision. It also tends to produce a future in which the many, not just the few, can participate and prosper.

To function in this connective leadership mode helps us to reject the "we/they dichotomy" by which we see

ourselves as different and superior to others. Novelist William Faulkner understood the importance of overcoming this pernicious dichotomy: "Apprehending the other in terms of mutual humanity is the task and the trouble" (Crouch, 2003, sec. R, p. 3).

The Zulu concept of Ubuntu, which guided the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the post-Apartheid period, calls for the creation of empathy, the ability to see others as part of ourselves. The Zulu proposition, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," which means "a person is a person through other persons" or "a person is a person through the otherness of other human beings," captures the essence of Ubuntu. Following Ubuntu, as expressed in the behavior and mind-set of connective leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2000), is one way to break the stranglehold of the "we/they dichotomy," that age-old ploy that toxic leaders use to entrap their followers.

Although these preparatory strategies call for serious introspection and self-transformation, one need not postpone pragmatic, practical action to offset the toxic leaders in our everyday lives. So, let us consider two more sets of down-to-earth, tough-minded strategies for use in our daily encounters with toxic leaders.

Organizational Strategies

Oftentimes, toxic leaders "get away with it" simply "because they can." Institutional policies, such as the following—some of which currently exist but need to be expanded and strengthened—provide an impersonal way of setting boundaries for all leaders, toxic and otherwise:

- Limits on tenure or terms for all leadership positions in political, civic, and organizational life
- A neutral ombudsperson
- Grievance procedures with serious consequences for offenders
- Regularly scheduled "town meetings" in which a leader must answer to all the stakeholders
- Reasonably accessible mechanisms and processes for recalling toxic leaders

Individual and Group Strategies

In addition to these personal preparatory and organizational strategies, a useful set of collective actions for preventing or removing toxic leaders is also available.

Do Your Homework Before You Act

Many toxic leaders have a documented history of toxic behavior. The modus operandi of toxic leaders frequently remains essentially the same, with previous "success" simply encouraging their daring and skill. The more you know about your particular toxic leader's past performance and how others have dealt with it, the better equipped you will be to handle the current situation.

Use the Internet to develop a "fix" on this leader's history. Speak to people who have worked with the toxic leader in other organizations and situations. Get the details of when, how, where, and what. Research the circumstances under which the toxic leader left his or her previous leadership role.

Be sure you have all the facts—negative and positive—about the current situation. On an individual and confidential basis, interview as many people as you can who have interacted with your toxic leader.

Give a Leader the Benefit of the Doubt: Confront and Counsel a Leader Through a Coalition

Constituents have some direct recourse when it comes to certain toxic leaders, particularly those not quite hardened into an impenetrable shell of arrogance and narcissism. Giving the toxic leader the benefit of the doubt requires confronting and possibly offering to counsel that leader.

Confrontation usually works best when a coalition of key opinion leaders is assembled to conduct an "intervention"-style process.[6] In some instances, coalitions can be very useful in persuading a midrange toxic leader to change. Working through a coalition also keeps a solo counselor from getting carried away with his or her own omniscience. Conversely, it prevents a lone counselor from being sucked into the toxic leader's orbit, or even worse, having his or her head chopped off literally or figuratively, depending on the era, by the toxic leader. When the toxic leader is forced to recognize there are multiple protesters, he or she is more likely to listen and attempt to meet their demands.

Other strategies that have been used with some success include offering the services of a qualified member of the coalition as a counselor or hiring an executive coach. One more possibility would be to create an advisory group with great transparency so others can see how the toxic leader's decisions evolve.

Undermine or Overthrow a Leader on the First Try

Deciding to undermine or overthrow a toxic leader is both a weighty decision and a strenuous undertaking. Both undermining and overthrowing a leader present moral dilemmas to be weighed, and personal risks should be carefully considered. In trying to oust a toxic leader, it is crucial to do so in a way that preserves your integrity and does not mire you, the white knights, in toxicity.

Discretion and surprise are keys to success. When a coalition is convinced that the toxic leader must be removed, it is time to develop a careful plan that is easy to implement. Keep your plan as concealed as possible, because advance warning will only serve to drive the toxic leader into high gear. Success is not necessarily guaranteed. Here, too, a coalition of opinion leaders within the toxic leader's group and from external, oversight groups as well are critical to success.

Involve the media only as a last resort. They often have their own, very different, agenda, and you may simply get caught up in their spinning propellers. Even when an individual reporter may "get it," the publisher at the top of the heap, under financial or political pressure, may be marching to a different drummer, particularly in a heterogeneous civic or political context.

One caveat is in order: Success *must* be achieved on the first attempt. Otherwise, the toxic leader, though wounded, has several advantages over the unsuccessful insurgents. First, the toxic leader often has the power, the institutional resources, and the political allies to eliminate the leaders of the insurgency. Second, the failure of the initial effort will demoralize other participants, who become intimidated, discouraged, or simply leave. Third, a leader then can hang on, regroup, and use lessons learned in the first attempt to prevent or undo the next assault by less experienced insurgents. As the Latin maxim advises, "*Quod non me interficit me confirmat,*" which, roughly translated, means, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

Summary

In conclusion, we cannot escape the fundamental vulnerability of simply being alive, but neither can we fall into the clutches of toxic leaders. Because their siren call soothes our anxieties and fears, we often succumb to these dangerous leaders who manipulate our yearnings for safety, significance, heroism, and immortality. Recognizing the tactics of toxic leaders and developing powerful offsetting strategies can enable us to elude their destructive grasp.

Toxic leaders cannot prevail without the support—either enthusiastic or simply acquiescent—of followers. Engaging in the difficult work of introspection and maturity that transforms us from passive followers into confident, active constituents is the first step toward breaking the hold of toxic leaders. Doing your homework, assembling a coalition or a network of coalitions, and then confronting a toxic leader usually prove more effective than solo action. And, let's not forget, strengthening and creating political, civic, and institutional policies to prevent and/or limit toxic leaders are essential bulwarks against the ravages of toxic leadership.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Richard Couto for pointing out Weber's relevant concern.

2. Erich Fromm (1969) has eloquently analyzed how the destruction of feudal society during the Reformation initially left all social classes adrift, without religious and social direction. Although the upheaval had ushered in a period of unimaginable human freedom, independence, and the heady concept of "free will," it also created a sense of personal isolation, insecurity, and anxiety. Fromm describes how Protestantism, the new order, relieved this personal anguish by replacing the former religious constraints with a different, but equally constricting, set of guidelines.

3. From its very inception, Judaism taught the Israelites they were Yahweh's chosen. Later, the Calvinists elaborated the concept of predestination, the belief that we are chosen before birth either to enjoy God's grace or to suffer eternal damnation.

4. C. Fred Alford has documented the dismal fate of most whistleblowers, many of whom find themselves deprived not simply of their jobs, but often of their careers, their colleagues, friends, and sometimes their families as well. Some whistle-blowers, such as Harry Markopolos, who repeatedly sent evidence of Bernie Madoff's scheme to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), are simply brushed off as "crazies." Less fortunate whistleblowers have even met mysterious deaths, such as Karen Silkwood, who testified before the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) about safety violations in the production of plutonium pellets for nuclear reactor fuel rods at a Kerr-McGee plant in Oklahoma. Other would-be whistle-blowers remain frozen in fear.

5. Harking back to the derivations of these two words, we see that "follower" comes from *folwen* in Middle English, meaning to come after in sequence or imitate, while "constituent" derives from the Latin, *constituere,* meaning to set up, found, or constitute. See www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/constituent.

6. Interventions staged by concerned family and friends of individuals addicted to alcohol and other drugs involve gathering the group to confront that individual with empathy, reality, and new direction. Usually, it is the precursor to the individual entering a treatment program.

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