

# TOXIC LEADERSHIP

## AFFECTS SOLDIERS AT ALL LEVELS

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What does a subordinate do when he or she has little control over the situation because the leader — that subordinate's commander — is creating the toxic environment?



I faced this exact question as a brand new “butterbar” lieutenant arriving to my first company in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The lessons I learned from that deployment forever changed and molded me into the leader I am today and made me realize the importance of bringing awareness to the issue of toxic leadership at company levels and below. Toxic leadership continues to distress those affected well after the source is gone from a unit, and as an Army, we are failing our Soldiers if we do not take the necessary action to rectify this problem and remove the poison from our ranks.

According to Jennifer Mattson’s article “Battling Toxic Leadership,” the Army defines “toxic leaders as those who put their own needs or image above their subordinates, who micromanage their subordinates, and who are insecure in their own positions.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, “in response to a Secretary of the Army tasking in 2003, U.S. Army War College faculty and students stated that toxic leaders ‘are focused on visible short-term mission accomplishment... provide superiors with impressive, articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions... [but] are unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate... [and] are seen by the majority of subordinates as arrogant, self-serving, inflexible, and petty.’”<sup>2</sup> Not all of these characteristics individually make a toxic leader, but together or even a combination of the aforementioned can be signs of toxic leadership.

In LTG (Retired) Walter F. Ulmer Jr.’s article titled, “Toxic Leadership: What Are We Talking About?” he refers to a U.S. Army War College study to define toxic leaders as, “self-serving, arrogant, volatile, and opinionated to the point of being organizationally dysfunctional...very persuasive, responsive, and accommodating to their seniors.”<sup>3</sup>

As a leadership major at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA), I had my fair share of lessons, briefings, and lectures on what it meant to be a good leader. Many outstanding leaders from across the military branches came to visit, give their testimonies, and share their experiences. Most of the testimonies focused on how they reacted in a situation or how they were able to overcome a traumatic event in their unit.

They were excellent speakers portraying good leadership: what to do and what not to do — how not to be “that guy” when an officer is new to a unit. Looking back, though, I realized that all of our briefings and lectures only portrayed good leaders, never the opposite. My leadership instructor and class discussed the signs of toxic leadership or a toxic environment, how to recognize the behaviors of those affected, and how to make a transformational change as the leader coming into a platoon or smaller unit who had been affected by previous toxic leader. However, none of these discussions ever addressed the realities of coming face-to-face with toxic leadership while it was still in the unit.

I had served as an assistant logistics officer for approximately six months when, one morning, we learned a company downrange had an incident with an improvised explosive device (IED). Two hours later, my battalion executive officer pulled me into his office and asked, “Is there anything that would keep you from deploying right now?” I was stunned, sitting there trying to figure out if I had just heard the words correctly. The split second it took for me to answer seemed to

take a while, “No, sir; I can deploy.”

He explained that one of the platoon leaders had been injured in the IED attack, and she and her husband, who is the company executive officer, were en route back stateside. “I am sending you and 2LT K. to fill in their slots,” he continued. “You have approximately two weeks to go through individual readiness training, situate your lives here, and deploy. There will be more to follow.”

When I heard I was deploying, I thought about how I would survive the Afghan summer heat, patrolling the streets in downtown Kandahar, and what I would do if faced with a deadly situation in combat. All of my survival scenarios dealt with the enemy. Never did I think I would have to ask myself how I would survive my commander, but it soon became apparent that surviving the toxic leadership that had infiltrated my gaining company would be the hardest struggle I would have to endure.

Other than the three-month training I had received at the Military Police (MP) Basic Officer Leadership Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and the condensed, one-week individual readiness training for pre-deployment augmentees, I had no experience to take with me to meet my platoon downrange. The only individual I knew was my battle buddy accompanying me, 2LT K. Knowing some of my anxieties, a couple of lieutenants reassured me that I was going to fall under the best company commander in the battalion. They had been platoon leaders in his company when he was a commander stateside and told me he was very energetic, technically sound, and a great mentor. Their news came as a relief, but as I soon learned, the man they described had drastically changed. Although he was energetic and tactically competent, as they said, he was far from a great mentor. The commander I faced was a toxic leader.

During my short, four-month tour, I served as a platoon leader conducting both MP and Infantry operations in the city of Kandahar. Since we were the only company in the city, we were actual land owners, responsible for everything that happened in Kandahar. To put it in perspective, our MP company had approximately 160 people; our unit alone covered the second largest city in Afghanistan and its outskirts (population of about 500,000). Our missions were so vast and our Soldiers spread so thin that when we left, five companies came to replace and take over what our one company had done. Our main mission while deployed was to embed and conduct joint patrols with Afghan National Police units to train them on military police tactics and bring stability to their city. My platoon was in charge of four police stations in the heart of Kandahar.

Along with the platoon leader whom I replaced, the company had also suffered the loss of an NCO in a firefight and others had been wounded. The Soldiers were tired and ready to go home. When I first arrived, there was a noticeable despair in the air. At the time, I could not quite put my finger on it and attributed it to the amount of stress and fatigue the unit had been enduring. It only took a week for me to start seeing the underlying issues. Soldiers didn’t seem to trust each other, specifically from one platoon to the next; they were constantly on guard and were almost fearful to say anything in case it could be used against them.

All of the Soldiers and NCOs in my new platoon had been there for eight months already and were proficient with the ins and outs of daily operations. They had built strong relationships and bonds, formed from a rigorous train-up and their subsequent deployment. Now they had just lost their platoon leader, and I was the “cherry LT” coming in to replace their beloved leader. How in the world was I supposed to fill those shoes; try to build up the morale of my platoon after losing someone they loved, they admired; earn their trust and respect; and get the remaining Soldiers and NCOs back home safely?

Within the first week, my commander and I had a one-on-one discussion about personal relationships and the toll the Army can take on them. I explained to him that I was engaged, and my fiancé and I were planning a wedding upon my return. My commander, who was married with children, told me, “the Army can put a strain on your relationship, and it is up to you as to how much you are willing to sacrifice.” It seemed like pretty decent advice. He continued to talk about relationships and how he was affected by the loss of the lieutenant I had replaced. He explained how much effort he had put into mentoring the lieutenant, and hearing him say that gave me hope that he might do the same for me. I was wrong.

The next day, during one of our meetings in the tactical operations center (TOC), my commander brought up our relationship discussion in front of everyone. He did not bring it up in a manner that was positive or jovial, but rather condescending and teasing me for even wanting to marry. He made comments like, “it won’t last,” “you don’t really want to get married,” and “are you even old enough to get married?” A light switch had flipped. The night before, my commander appeared very personable and approachable, but today he had become a different individual. He betrayed my trust by using facts about my personal life against me while I said nothing about what he shared the night before. LTG (R) Ulmer’s toxic leadership attributes of being opinionated and possibly petty were beginning to surface.<sup>4</sup>

From that point on, my fiancé and other facts about my life became objects of his ridicule. His demeanor toward me began turning volatile, and he was unpredictable with his behavior, another sign of toxic leadership.<sup>5</sup> I never knew if he was going to harass me or, hopefully, not even notice I was there. No one spoke up for me; no one responded to his taunting. It was as though they were afraid to speak up for fear that they, too, might become his whipping dog. No one wanted to be on his bad side. He immediately ostracized me, ensuring that even my battle buddies would eventually come to neglect me for fear of reprimand. He continuously belittled me during meetings, pointing out that I knew nothing. I had only ever heard talk of what toxic leadership was, but encountering it face-to-face was a whole other matter. The signs of toxic leadership, as described by the U.S. Army War College study, were becoming more apparent with each passing day: arrogant, volatile, self-serving.<sup>6</sup>

My Soldiers and I were tasked as escorts to brief VIPs including several high-ranking officers and multiple reporters. Acknowledging that this was a high-profile event, I listened to what my commander wanted from my platoon. At first, he was reasonable in allowing me to make decisions, but then as

he had done numerous times, he directed me on how to do everything for the VIP visit. Instead of mentoring and walking me through the steps of the operation as he would have done for his previous lieutenant, he micromanaged; he showed his inflexibility to allow me to conduct my own missions. Although I did everything required and asked of me, nothing I did was ever good enough in the eyes of my commander.

My only reprieve was actually going on patrols in sector with my Soldiers to embed with the local ANPs. It was not until one month after being with my platoon that the Soldiers began to trust me and see the leader that I was, not the leader the commander made me out to be. Living with my Soldiers out in sector, conducting everyday operations, and showing them I genuinely cared for their well-being allowed my platoon to understand my leadership style. Once they began to trust me and open up, I began to understand what had actually happened in the eight months before I arrived. The more stories I heard, the more I pieced together the realities of living in this environment for so long.

A couple years later, I asked now-CPT K about his feelings of the company when he first arrived in country; he explained:

*It was horrible. There were a lot of different sidebar things going on. You had some sexual misconduct stuff occurring in the company, drug issues not being enforced. The first sergeant and the commander did not talk to each other; they were not on same page. The commander tried everything he could to avoid his responsibilities in the rear by going out in sector nonstop. One of the worst company environments I'd ever seen.<sup>7</sup>*

In his description alone, multiple signs of a toxic environment jump out: sexual misconduct, drug problems, leadership not on the same page. Identifying the issues was easy in this case, but how does one go about fixing the problem if the leadership is allowing it? In “Battling Toxic Leadership,” Mattson lists tools that leadership can use to receive feedback such as command climate surveys, open-door policies, and sensing sessions.<sup>8</sup> All of these are excellent ways for a leader who is willing to receive feedback and criticism. However, narcissistic, toxic leaders do not believe anything is wrong with their leadership style and are unwilling to take any criticism.

As weeks went on, I noticed how differently I was treated compared to my peers. When I conducted a shura — a task required by the battalion commander — my commander accused me of trying to throw my peers “under the bus” because they had not been able to schedule shuras yet in their timelines. My commander would speak to my peers with respect and talk to me like I was a child, literally speaking down to me from his 6-plus foot stature (I am only 5 feet, 4 inches tall). He would hang out with the other lieutenants and one platoon sergeant (PSG), laughing at inside jokes and playing around, but the second I accidentally stumbled upon them, all jokes turned to me.

As one Soldier who has since retired from the Army put it, “From what I saw, his leadership as a whole was better than some but worse than others. He played favoritism a lot.”<sup>9</sup> LT K, too, noticed the difference in the way the commander treated his inner ring compared to others. “He was very different to different people. I thought he was very unfair to certain individuals and picked on people,” he said. Because LT K

came with 15 years of prior service, the commander basically said, "Here are the reins, go do your thing," but because I was new, he trusted me with nothing. He would micromanage many of the daily operations as opposed to mentoring and showing me how to conduct them properly.<sup>10</sup>

As I observed the unit, I noticed that the moral compasses of everyone seemed to have lost bearing. It seemed as though the toxic leadership had spewed over into the platoons and created an environmental wasteland. For instance, infidelity and fraternization occurred quite frequently among the Soldiers and NCOs. When I asked those in my platoon about it, they shrugged it off as if it were a normal occurrence. The Soldiers and NCOs made it seem as though the chain of command knew of this behavior within the company but, obviously, had done nothing to stop it. There appeared to be a complete lack of discipline, which is another sign of a toxic environment.

I could not wrap my head around it. Is this normal behavior

in all units? The signs of a toxic leader and toxic environment were evident all around. I thought of going to higher to tell them what was happening in this unit, but LT K best described the issues with taking that route:

*If you're allowed to talk to higher, you can, but then you have to walk on eggshells because it could backfire in your face. [The commander] had friends in high places. He was best friends with the brigade commander. Who do you go to? There were known issues that the commander completely ignored, such as investigations, but what do you do?*<sup>11</sup>

Our commander had been very accommodating to his seniors, an attribute of toxic leadership as described by LTG Ulmer, which made him appear like an extraordinary leader.<sup>12</sup>

In "Battling Toxic Leadership," 1SG Michael Lindsay said that, "general education, professional development programs and mentorship programs... can significantly reduce the number of leaders who are toxic to the unit."<sup>13</sup> This approach involves the leadership of the toxic leader mentoring and



counseling him/her directly and can be effective when used properly. Unfortunately, in my case, my commander's leaders thought he was already an outstanding leader, and even when a survey conducted after the deployment revealed some issues, the decision was to get rid of my commander as soon as possible instead of investing time to possibly transform him.

While I tried my hardest to maintain my integrity, I was not immune to the effects of this toxic environment. By the second month, I was already questioning my beliefs, looking inward at myself and wondering if there was something wrong with me.

As I began to question my own morals and leadership capabilities and after endlessly seeing a toxic environment around me, I realized that this poison was spreading through the ranks. The commander set the tone, and if I were not careful, I would begin to follow his leadership, good or bad. Toxic leadership does not stop with just one individual, even though others like myself continuously tried to shield our subordinates from it.

It was on one particular occasion, when I was reprimanded for doing the right thing, that I realized that I was completely isolated in this deployment. On our forward operating base in Kandahar, we had a rule that no matter where we went, Soldiers would wear their M9s at all times. This was a direct result of someone losing his M9 earlier in the deployment. It was obnoxious, especially while having to use the port-potties, but we all did what we were told, save one person: LT K's PSG. I had noticed his PSG walking around the FOB without his weapon strapped to his leg on a couple occasions, and my Soldiers, too, were wondering why he was not following the rules. While passing LT K on the way to the TOC, I mentioned to him, "Hey, I've noticed your platoon sergeant doesn't always wear his M9, and my Soldiers are starting to notice, too. You might want to let him know to set a good example." That was the end of that conversation, or so I thought.

Later that evening, I got word that the commander wanted to see me in his office, so I went without hesitation. Even though I would rather not be in his presence, I could count the number of times he requested me by name on one hand and all were for important matters. After I knocked on his door and entered his office in the TOC, he immediately began scolding me for "calling out" this PSG. I could not believe I was being reprimanded for upholding and enforcing the commander's own rules. Once he was finished letting me know yet again how I screwed up, I walked out and asked my buddy what happened.

From LT K's account, he took his platoon sergeant aside to let him know that others were noticing how he was not following the rules. My buddy said his PSG walked off in frustration straight to the commander's office to complain that Soldiers from my platoon needed to mind their own business. I heard the news and was dumbfounded. How was this sergeant just allowed to march into the commander's office to gripe, and more importantly, why had my commander not scolded the PSG for not upholding a standard that everyone else in his company was?

LT K, too, admitted that he encountered firsthand how the commander's leniency toward his platoon sergeant only fed

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the PSG's toxic leadership style. One evening, LT K, who was clearly in the right, brought an issue concerning his PSG to the commander. Instead of defending LT K, the commander scolded him in front of his PSG. Once the NCO left the office, LT K said that the commander told him, "I know you're right, but I had to do that in front of him. It's just the way he handles things."

The commander's toxic leadership enabled LT K's PSG to continue spreading the toxic environment down to the lowest level. Recently, an NCO who served under that PSG during the deployment revealed the bipolar nature of the PSG, another sign of toxic leadership:

*He would treat us NCOs like crap one second, and then told us how much he loved us the next. It was hard dealing with him and with the intensity of the deployment at the same time... there were many tense situations with him getting in people's faces that I personally witnessed.<sup>14</sup>*

Even though the situation in the platoon was horrible, the NCO explained why he and many of his peers avoided going to higher to address the issue of his PSG's toxicity.

*The unfortunate thing about that kind of situation was that most of my peers and supervisors were scared of that person, not only physically, but their careers would be affected if they said something to someone.<sup>15</sup>*

Fortunately, for this NCO, he said that he was helped tremendously by his squad leaders and team leaders to get through the deployment; they relied on each other to help everyone make it through. Even though the remaining Soldiers did make it back alive, for many, the toxic environment of the deployment continued to haunt them.

The effects of toxic leadership can last for a while and sometimes be permanent, even after the toxic leader is gone. For instance, after we had been back stateside for a couple months and our commander had left the unit, I was sitting in my office when out of nowhere I heard his laugh. I froze in my seat. He had come back to visit for a few minutes with LT K and other Soldiers. At the sound of his voice, my stomach dropped, heart stopped, and the fear and dread of just knowing he was in the same vicinity as me made me sick. I stayed glued to my office chair until I heard him leave. I suffered from physical, emotional, and psychological effects from my commander's toxic leadership, but what I did not realize until later was that

others had suffered from the toxic environment as well.

Upon returning home, the company shuffled Soldiers around so I lost some and gained some from other platoons within the unit. I had an NCO come over from the platoon with the toxic PSG, and this NCO performed outstandingly well while in my platoon. A year later, this NCO was needed back in the former platoon because of expertise, and as I relayed the good news, or so I thought, this NCO broke down and immediately had a panic attack. I had no idea sending this NCO back would cause a traumatic event. Just the thought of going back to the other platoon, even though the toxic PSG was long gone, caused a terrible, physical reaction. The NCO explained to me some of the experiences from the toxic PSG, and I, in turn, explained that I fully understood and had gone through the same problems but with the commander; it was a rather unique, bonding and healing experience for the both of us. I convinced the NCO that going back to the platoon would not be the same experience as before. After going back, the NCO again proved to be a valuable asset and blossomed into a tremendous leader.

That incident opened my eyes that I had not been alone in suffering from the toxic environment created by the commander and perpetuated by the toxic PSG. Over the years, Soldiers revealed more stories about our deployment, and some began to open up about how the toxic environment had affected them. Fortunately, all of those I talked to who were directly affected by the toxic environment were able to cope with any issues they had and continued to have successful careers. However, those Soldiers should never have had to cope with those issues to begin with. As an Army, we must be able to stop toxicity within our ranks.

A good leadership development program that already exists is the Mission Command Conference held annually at USMA in West Point, N.Y. Over a couple days, senior cadets from USMA, ROTC, and midshipmen from the Naval Academy engage in a series of briefs, discussions, and leadership challenges from operational leaders who have recently returned from deployment. The leaders include officers and NCOs who openly discuss the issues and lessons learned from their experiences to the cadets and midshipmen. This conference is an excellent opportunity to highlight good and bad leadership and possible ways to handle toxic leadership.

Although there is no clear-cut guidance or foolproof way to discover toxic leadership and rectify the situation, there are some possible solutions. LTG Ulmer mentioned a couple approaches: establish a system for regularly scheduled command climate surveys and provide supplemental information from subordinates for selection boards. Although command climate surveys do occur, having them more frequently and determining who can see them would provide better detection and early warning if a toxic environment does exist within a unit. The Army's Multi-source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) 360 process is a good tool to receive feedback from superiors, peers, and subordinates alike, but it is for that individual alone receiving the 360 assessment and not used for the selection process. LTG Ulmer suggested using feedback from subordinates during selection boards to determine the true capability and quality of potential leaders.

Currently, general officers have the ability to write anonymous feedback about any other general officer and likewise receive anonymous feedback from any general officer; this information is used by their superiors to determine who would best serve in available positions. Because of its anonymity and wide scope of potential feedback, this tactic proves valuable at their level to weed out any underperforming leaders. If used at lower levels, this process could help detect possible toxic leaders and change the situation for the better. Another suggestion I recently received on how to detect toxic leadership would be to modify the 360 assessment tool. Instead of the individual picking out whom he or she wanted as superiors, peers, and subordinates for the feedback, that individual would be directed by his or her direct chain of command as to whom to pick. Once the feedback was completed, the individual would discuss the results with his or her chain of command to determine just exactly how to improve, sustain, or if a toxic leader, be dismissed from that position.

It all begins with leaders providing that good environment for Soldiers to excel and feel like they can communicate with their leadership, using an open-door policy, should any signs of toxicity arise. This open communication needs to begin at the lowest level because toxic leadership is not limited to higher ranking Soldiers, and as discussed in this article, it affects Soldiers at all levels within the unit. There is no 100-percent solution to ridding the Army of toxic leaders, but by making people aware of the issues, signs, and providing them with solutions, the Army may be better equipped with identifying any toxic issues that could be in a unit and ensuring a positive transformation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Mattson, "Battling Toxic Leadership," *NCO Journal*, June 2012, 12-13. Accessed online at [http://www.army.mil/article/82622/Battling\\_toxic\\_leadership](http://www.army.mil/article/82622/Battling_toxic_leadership).

<sup>2</sup> LTG (Retired) Walter Ulmer, "Toxic Leadership: What Are We Talking About?" *ARMY*, June 2012, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Toxic Leadership, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Toxic Leadership, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Toxic Leadership, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Toxic Leadership, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>8</sup> Battling toxic leadership, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>12</sup> Toxic Leadership, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Battling toxic leadership, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>15</sup> Personal Interview.

<sup>16</sup> Mission Command Conference.

<sup>17</sup> Toxic Leadership, 50,52.

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