

Toxic Leadership in Educational Organizations

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While research on the traits and skills of effective leaders is plentiful, only recently has the phenomenon of toxic leadership begun to be investigated. This research report focuses on toxic leadership in educational organizations – its prevalence, as well as the characteristics and early indicators. Using mixed methods, the study found four patterns that describe toxic leaders: egotism, ethical failure, incompetence, and neuroticism. In addition, results identified a set of behaviors that suggest early warning signs of toxic leadership. In addition, recommendations include training personnel who participate in the search and selection process for leaders in schools, colleges, and universities so that they are better equipped to assess leadership potential, as well as the potential for toxic leadership.

Introduction

Leadership matters. History is graced with examples of transformative leaders – leaders who elevated the aspirations of their followers, inspired their vision, and harnessed their collective will to achieve common goals that would have otherwise been unattainable. Gardner and Laskin (2011) provided profiles of exemplary leadership by persons operating in very different fields of endeavor and by employing very different means of influence. However, history is also replete with examples of leaders who have inflicted unspeakable harm on their nations, their companies, their churches, or their schools. The global financial meltdown of 2008 is grist for gripping case studies on failed leadership in both the political and business arenas (George, 2008); and, the horrific child abuse scandals in churches (Bruni, 2013) and systemic cheating on standardized tests by school districts (Wineri, 2013) offer yet more, albeit in different types of organizations. Indeed, leadership matters.

This study explores the phenomenon of toxic leadership – leadership that causes, either abruptly or gradually, systemic harm to the health of an organization, impairing the organization from meeting its mission. In particular, the investigation focused on toxic leadership in educational organizations. The researcher employed mixed methods to determine the prevalence of toxic leadership in schools, colleges, and universities, as well as to describe the characteristics of toxic leaders. Finally, the researcher sought to identify early indicators of toxic leaders.

What We Know about Toxic Leadership

Recent and detailed documentation of abusive behavior by leaders in nearly all types of large organizations, from businesses to political states to churches, has led social

scientists to begin to study leadership from a different perspective – the dark side (Goldman, 2009; Kellerman, 2004; Kets de Vries, 1984; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Williams, 2005). Of course, dramatists and novelists have always been aware of the effects of bad leaders. From Sophocles' Creon to William Shakespeare's Richard III to Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, we have been given insight into leaders who led (or pushed) others to their destruction. Whereas the last half century has seen an explosion of research on the traits, skills, and styles of *effective leaders* (Northouse, 2010), only within the last two decades have researchers tried to describe and understand the behavior of *toxic leaders*. In the review of literature that ensues, toxic leadership is defined and the various types of toxic leaders are discussed. In addition, research on why organizations continue to have to deal with toxic leadership is reviewed.

Toxic Leadership Defined

The term “toxic leader” first appeared in 1996 (Wicker, 1996), but as yet no standard definition of toxic leadership exists. Indeed, a variety of terms that refer to the same phenomenon can be found in the literature. Kellerman (2004) uses “bad leadership,” while others (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007) use the term “destructive leadership.” However, “toxic leadership” increasingly is becoming the preferred label for leadership that harms an organization (whether a business, a political state, or a church). Lipman-Blumen (2009) has defined toxic leadership as “a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead” (p. 29). Williams (2005) extended this definition by noting that toxic leadership appears in degrees, from the clueless who cause minor harm to the overtly evil who inflict serious damage. She stated,

At one end of the spectrum, dysfunctional leaders may simply be unskilled, unproductive and completely unaware of the fact that they are lacking in the necessary talent to lead. At the other extreme, toxic leaders will find their success and glory in their destruction of others. Be it psychological or even physical, they will thrive on the damage they can inflict on others. (p. 1)

Williams' definition suggests that toxic leadership can be both intentional and unintentional. Both, of course, are observed through a leader's behavior.

Leaders need followers; followers need leaders. Thus, any definition of toxic leadership must take into account the characteristics of the followers as well as the characteristics of the leader. Kusy and Holloway (2009) have explained that toxic leaders are able to thrive only in a toxic environment. Of course, their explanation begs the debate of which comes first, the toxic leader or the toxic environment. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) addressed this issue when they proposed the concept of the toxic triangle: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. Their definition of destructive leaders emphasizes “negative outcomes for organizations and individuals linked with and affected by [destructive leaders]” (p. 176). In other words, the damage done is systemic. Piecing together the various definitions, we find two elements that define toxic leadership. First of all, toxic leaders' behavior harms (directly

or indirectly) individuals within the organization. And second, their behavior results in systemic damage to the effectiveness of the organization.

Prevalence of Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is not rare, by any means. Kusy and Holloway (2009) reported that 64% of the respondents in their study stated that they were currently suffering under a toxic leader. Moreover, 94% indicated that they had worked with a toxic person at some point in their careers. Some organizations apparently are worse than others. Solfield and Salmond (2003) reported that 91% of nurses reported having experienced verbal abuse that left them humiliated. In a study conducted at the Army War College consisting of senior officers with over 20 years of experience in the Army, all of the participants (i.e., 100%) had experienced toxic leadership (Bullis & Reed, as cited in Williams, 2005). Indeed, toxic leadership is not rare.

Of course, toxic leadership is found in degrees. Kusy and Holloway's description of toxic leadership (2009) makes the distinction between leaders who might have a bad day and those whose bad behavior is habitual. They asked their participants to recall someone from their professional experience whom they thought of as toxic, then rate that person on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most toxic that they could imagine. Three quarters of the persons considered as toxic registered 8 to 10. Moreover, there was an even distribution between males and females among the persons identified as toxic. In Kusy and Holloway's study, toxic behavior was found to be an equal opportunity phenomenon.

Why Do We Have Toxic Leaders?

Like Prometheus, who kept as a pet the vulture who consumed his liver, we seem to have difficulty breaking the cycles of what we know does harm to us. Toxic leadership is no different. Often, people unwittingly seek a leader who has the very qualities that result in systemic harm to their organization. Witness the times – past and present – that electorates have returned candidates to political office who previously were found guilty of corruption. Lipman-Blumen (2005), in her seminal work on why toxic leaders are able to frequently gain and hold on to power proposed five clusters of reasons. First, she cited psychological reasons, beginning with “our need for authority figures to fill our parents’ shoes” (p.29). In addition, she included a “need for certainty, which prompts us to surrender freedom . . .” (p.29). Once finding ourselves in the clutch of a toxic leader, our acquiescence stems from “our fear of personal powerlessness . . .” (p.29). Lipman-Blumen theorized that the natural human condition of existential anxiety may be the source of our willingness to submit to authority figures. As she explained,

The infinite possibilities of life, lashed to the finite limitations of inevitable death, induce two profound emotions: exhilaration and desolation. This fundamental contradiction in our human condition frames our behavior, our yearnings, our vulnerabilities, our dreams, and our strengths. (p. 50)

Lipman-Blumen suggested that, while we fear the uncertainties in life, we also are acutely aware of the possibilities. In midst of our anxiety, we harbor hope; and hope allows toxic leaders to “offer illusions: our lifeline in an uncertain world” (p. 50).

One of the myths of toxic leaders, according to Kusy and Holloway (2009), is that most people will not tolerate toxic behavior by their leaders. However, their research revealed the opposite to be true much of the time. They cited two reasons. One is that the toxic leader might be a high performer; and, as Lipman-Blumen (2005) pointed out, we live in an achievement oriented society. We value *how much* is accomplished more than *how* it is accomplished. Another, cited by Kusy and Holloway as well as Lipman-Blumen, is fear of retribution. Toxic leaders are notorious for wanting to settle scores. However, not all toxic leaders are bullies. They take many forms, and often they are not readily recognizable. Some researchers have begun to work on describing the varieties of toxic leaders.

Types of Toxic Leaders

Toxic leaders are not all the same. Kusy and Holloway (2009) factored toxic leadership behavior into three types: (a) Shaming; (b) Passive hostility; and (c) Team sabotage. They explained how each of these types works in concert with one another to keep toxic leadership in place. Nonetheless, the three types lack the necessary specificity to provide a clear understanding of how toxic leadership looks in practice. Other researchers have provided more detailed lists of the behavioral traits of toxic leaders.

For example, in a study of toxic leadership in the U.S. Army, Williams (2005) identified 18 separate types of toxic leaders, along with a separate set of 18 personal characteristics. Table 1 depicts the results from Williams' research.

Table 1

Personal Characteristics of Toxic Leaders and Types of Toxic Leaders Identified by Williams

Personal Characteristics	Types of Toxic Leaders
Incompetence	Absentee leader
Malfunctioning	Incompetent leader
Maladjusted	Codependent leader
Sense of inadequacy	Passive-aggressive leader
Malcontent	Busybody leader
Irresponsible	Paranoid leader
Amoral	Rigid leader
Cowardice	Controlling leader
Insatiable ambition	Compulsive leader
Egotism	Intemperate leader
Arrogance	Enforcer leader
Selfish values	Narcissistic leader
Avarice and greed	Callous leader
Lack of integrity	Street fighter
Deception	Corrupt leader
Malevolent	Insular leader
Malicious	Bully leader
Malfeasance	Evil leader

Upon examination of Williams' two lists, one of personal characteristics and one of types of toxic leaders, one might observe that they do not appear to be discrete items. Within each of the lists, some of the items appear to be similar.

Schmidt (2008) conducted a study using a broader base of professional experience for his participants and he generated a list of toxic leader types. Using his own instrument, the *Schmidt Toxic Leadership Scale*[®], he identified five types of toxic leaders: (a) self-promotion; (b) abusive supervision; (c) unpredictability; (d) narcissism, and (e) authoritarian leader. In addition, he listed specific behaviors that nested within each type. However, Schmidt's list leaves out toxic effects of a leader's ethical failures or even the leader's failure to act.

A strictly psychodynamic approach was taken by Kets de Vries and Miller (1984). Using case studies, they described leaders who do systemic damage to their organizations in terms of the various types of neuroses. They explained how organizations can take on the same characteristics of a particular type of neurosis as seen in their leader. For example, they described the paranoid leader, the depressive leader, and the schizoid leader among others. Kets de Vries and Miller's work was influential in calling attention to the need for further research on toxic leadership.

As a psychological construct, toxic leadership poses problems. As Fiedler (1993) pointed out, what might seem toxic leadership to one member of an organization could appear to be effective leadership to another. Or, what might be perceived as toxic in one

organizational culture could be considered desirable in another. For example, norms for effective leadership in a for-profit business are different than a church, which are different than a city council. Additionally, when an organization comes around to recognizing toxic leadership, often it is too late. Damage to the organizational culture is already happening and the organization's effectiveness already is in decline. Help in identifying the early indicators of toxic leadership is sorely needed.

Early Indicators of Toxic Leadership

Even though Lipman-Blumen (2005) provided a convincing explanation for why individuals are willing to follow toxic leaders, most (all things equal) would rather not. We would like to overcome whatever tendencies we have that make us vulnerable to toxic leadership. The first step, of course, is to understand the full extent of the damage that toxic leaders can inflict upon organizations. And the second step is to recognize toxic behavior when we experience it. As Kusy and Holloway (2009) noted, that is not as easy as one might think. All too often, we recognize toxic leadership after it is already causing deleterious effects of the organization. If we are to avoid toxic leadership in the first place, we need to be able to spot the early indicators. Sailors say, "Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning." What we need in the area of research on toxic leadership is the social scientist's equivalent of a "red sky." Unfortunately, the research on early indicators for toxic leadership is scant.

The difficulty in observing toxic leadership before it is too late, according to Kusy and Holloway (2009), originates in the subtlety of the toxic behaviors. Lipman-Blumen (2005) also pointed out that toxic leaders are skilled in deception. Nonetheless, Lipman-Blumen did attempt to identify the early warning signs and compiled a list of behaviors. However, the items that she listed lack grounding in empirical evidence.

Perhaps the closest anyone has come to showing how we can detect toxic leadership before it is unleashed on an organization would be the researchers who have devised instruments for assessing the relationship between leadership attributes and personality traits. Hogan and Hogan (2001) have proposed a method for predicting the derailment of management careers. Although, they have admitted that many organizations are reluctant to utilize psychological assessments (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). Indeed, they noted that most senior executives would refuse to take them.

Summary of Research on Toxic Leadership

The concept of toxic leadership eludes definition. Moreover, the behaviors associated with toxic leadership resist early identification. Researchers have described toxic leadership behaviors in various organizational contexts, although they have not as yet found reliable indicators of early stages of toxic leadership or ways of predicting it. Also, research to date has focused on business environments or the military. Toxic leadership in educational organizations – schools, colleges, and universities – has yet to be researched.

Method

This investigation utilized a concurrent, embedded mixed methods design. The quantitative phase consisted of a survey that used Schmidt's (2008) *Toxic Leadership*

Scale[®], which is a 30 item questionnaire designed to observe the prevalence of specific toxic leadership behaviors. Instructions for the questionnaire asked invited participants to report whether they had any experience with a toxic leader, with a definition for toxic leadership given in the instructions. For the purpose of this investigation, the researcher created the following definition of toxic leadership:

A “toxic leader” is any person who as a manager, supervisor, or executive impairs the effectiveness of the organization (or unit) over which he or she has responsibility, whether directly or indirectly. It helps to understand “toxic leadership” by recalling the definition of a “toxin” – an agent that, when introduced to a system, does systemic harm.

In addition, a series of open-ended questions were included that asked participants to reflect upon when toxic leadership behaviors first occurred and to describe them. The open-ended questions were designed for participants to use their own words to describe their experiences with toxic leaders, with attention given to their personal description of toxic leadership behaviors, incidents that typified toxic leadership, and the first indications of toxic leadership behaviors. The instrument was distributed via e-mail to a stratified random sample of 300 educators dispersed in all 50 states, with 150 going to educators in P-12 schools and 150 going to educators in higher education.

Results

Quantitative

A total of 51 participants responded to the survey for a return rate of 17%. Results confirmed that toxic leadership is, indeed, a prevalent phenomenon, with 90% ($n=45$) reporting previous or current experience with toxic leaders. Respondents to the survey were 59% female ($n=30$) and 43% male ($n=21$), and 80% of the total reported having had 11 or more years of experience working in educational organizations. Respondents were evenly divided between P – 12 schools and higher education, with 53% ($n=27$) from higher education and 48% ($n=24$) from P – 12 schools.

Responses to the individual items on the *Toxic Leadership Scale*[®] (2008) revealed that toxic leadership behaviors are notable for their variety and are observed with frequency. Of the 30 specific behaviors listed on the instrument, 19 were reported by over half the participants as occurring “frequently.” Table 2 lists these frequently occurring toxic behaviors, which the researcher sorted into three categories after conducting qualitative analysis of the items.

Table 2

Toxic Leadership Behaviors from Toxic Leadership Scale

Egotistical behavior characteristics	Controlling/micro-managing behavior	Personality
Drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present	Is not considerate about subordinates' commitments outside of work	Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace
Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her unit	Controls how subordinates complete their tasks	Allows his/her mood to affect his/her vocal tone and volume
Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her	Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways	Causes subordinates to try to "read" his/her mood
Acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion	Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own ¹	Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned
Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead	Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in special circumstances ²	Varies in his/her degree of approachability ²
Has a sense of personal entitlement	Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not	
Assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organization	Varies in his/her degree of approachability ²	
Thinks that he/she is more capable than others		
Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person		
Thrives on compliments and personal accolades		

Will ignore ideas that are
contrary to his/her own²

Footnotes on Table 2:

¹ Denotes an item that appears in both first and second columns

² Denotes an item that appears in both the second and third columns

Egotism/self-serving. Survey results revealed the strong presence of egotistical behaviors by toxic leaders, with a predilection toward self-serving goals. The average for the behaviors occurring “frequently” was 70%, with “Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own” registering the highest occurrence (87% of respondents reported as occurring “frequently”). Also registering high on the scale, with respondents reporting as occurring “frequently” over 70% of the time, were “Has a sense of personal entitlement” (72%), “Thinks that he/she is more capable than others” (75%), and “Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person” (76%).

Controlling/micro-managing. Toxic leaders are also seen as controlling by their followers. The average for controlling behaviors occurring “frequently” was 61%, with “Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own” (87%) as the foremost toxic behavior. In other words, toxic leaders insisted on having the last word and having their own way. Other behaviors indicative of micro-management, where respondents reported that the behavior occurred “frequently” 60% of the time or more, included “Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways” (60%) and “Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not” (60%). One behavior that falls into the categories of both controlling behavior and emotions is “Varies in his/her degree of approachability” (65%). This behavior is indicative of a person who seeks to control the emotions of others, as well as being unpredictable in her or his own.

Personality characteristics. Behaving with unpredictable moods appears to be another consistent pattern of behavior among toxic leaders, as reported by respondents. The average for these items occurring “frequently” was 55%, with “Varies in his/her degree of approachability” (65%) as the leading indicator. Also notable was “Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace” (55%), indicating that toxic leaders would be low on *Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test*[®] (2004).

Qualitative

In addition to the questionnaire using the *Toxic Leadership Scale*[®] (2008), participants were asked to complete a series of open-ended questions. These questions asked participants to use their own words to describe the toxic leaders with whom they had experience, as well as describe incidents that revealed the toxic leadership behaviors. A total of 36 participants volunteered additional information through the open-ended questions, and here the results proved quite informative.

Data analysis. Three stages of data analysis were performed. The first stage consisted of finding patterns that participants used to describe toxic leaders and the second stage consisted of collapsing these patterns into a smaller set of themes. In the final stage, the raw data were re-visited for the purpose of identifying early indicators of toxic leadership as reported by participants. Table 3 depicts the patterns and themes from

the first two stages of data analysis. The three themes are arranged in the order of their prominence, with egotism and ethical failure being most prominent.

Table 3

Description of Toxic Leaders: Patterns and Themes Found in Interview Data

Themes (2nd stage of analysis)	Initial Patterns (1st stage of analysis)
Egotism	Arrogance; Bullying; Sense of entitlement
Ethical failure	Abuse of authority – personnel decisions; Abuse of authority – misuse of resources; Lying; Avoiding responsibility by blaming others; Manipulative
Incompetence	Human relations skills – poor listener; Human relations skills – insensitive (or false sensitivity); Human relations skills – unpredictable moods; Conceptual skills – lack of focus on mission; Technical skills – poor planner (crisis management)
Neuroticism	Narcissistic; Paranoid; Bipolar; Manic; Manipulative

Egotism. In the qualitative segment of this investigation, participants corroborated their view that toxic leaders are, first and foremost, egotists. When asked to describe the toxic leader in one word, they used terms like “self-absorbed,” “prima donna,” “pompous,” and “arrogant” with frequency. Participants also noted that the egotism of toxic leaders can show the face of the bully. As one put it, “He was always right and anyone who dared to question him paid a high price.” Toxic leaders also appear to enjoy their perquisites. Several were reported as remodeling their office suites as a first order of business, and others called attention to themselves for their excessive travel.

Ethical failure. Pre-occupation with self seems to lead to ethical lapses. Issues of ethical failure appeared consistently in the participants’ comments. The most frequently occurring ethical failure was lying. Indeed, lying was one of the first indications that people were dealing with toxic leadership. Whether the lies were overt or they were better characterized, as one participant phrased it, as showing “a casual disregard of facts to suit his purpose,” toxic leaders saw their integrity fade in the eyes of their subordinates by playing loose with the truth. Another area of ethical failure was abuse of power, especially in the area of personnel decisions. Incidents reported by

participants included circumventing the faculty search and selection process to hire personal favorites, as well as using the evaluation or promotion/tenure process to capriciously punish those who were out-of-favor. Abuse of power also took the form of misuse of funds or property, usually in the form of excessive travel or a penchant for gourmet when entertaining. Finally, and also related to the theme of egotism, toxic leaders seem to be prone to avoid their own responsibility by blaming others whenever something went wrong. In the words of one participant, “It was never her but always someone else who got the blame.”

Incompetence. “Incompetent” was cited frequently when participants were asked to describe the person whom they considered to be a toxic leader. However, none of the participants mentioned competence in the sense of professional knowledge. Rather, they were referring to the managerial skills. Katz (1955) proposed that leadership skills are of three types – technical, human, and conceptual. And, he explained, the higher one climbs on the managerial ladder the more important the conceptual skills, such as systems thinking (Senge, 1990) and strategic planning, become. However, at all times, according to Katz, human relations skills are central to the functions of leadership.

In this investigation, the toxic leaders described by participants were considered woefully inept in human relations skills. Words like “dictatorial” and “inconsiderate” were used frequently. Moreover, poor listening skills proved to be a consistent pattern. These toxic leaders, as a pattern, insisted on dominating conversations or meetings and communication was one-way (top-down). They were also viewed as insensitive, or at least unaware of others’ feelings, and unaware of how their changing moods affected others. One toxic leader was described as “very moody.” In reference to Goleman’s (1995) use of the term “Emotional Intelligence,” this investigation suggests that there is the analogic phenomenon of “Emotional Intelligence Deficit Disorder (EIDD).” These toxic leaders displayed an inability, or at least unwillingness, to regulate their own emotions and were viewed by their subordinates as inept in reading the emotions of others. One additional aspect of managerial incompetence includes the lack of focus. “Chaotic” was used several times to describe the toxic leader. One leader was described by a participant as “All over the place . . . we never knew what the priorities were because there was a new one whenever she came back from a conference.” Conversely, toxic leadership can take the opposite form; instead of too many priorities there can be none. One participant said “We were adrift . . . we had no direction.”

Neuroticism. Another theme emerged from the data – neuroticism. While this analysis of data does not claim to have any grounding in clinical psychology, terms used by Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) in their book, *The Neurotic Organization*, come to mind. Comments such as “insecure” and “secretive” and “wild swings in mood” formed a pattern. Also, critical incidents reported by the participants revealed that toxic leaders have a single-minded focus on self-aggrandizement. As one participant said, “She always had to be center-stage . . . any conversation that you had with her always ended up being about her.” Another reported, “With him, it was ‘all about me’ . . . no one else’s ideas mattered.” One participant described a supervisor as “sociopathic,” another as “bipolar,” and another used the term “paranoid.” While these comments are not interpreted by the researcher in the context of clinical usage, they do suggest the intensity of the behavior by toxic leaders as perceived by their subordinates. Also, “Lack of

transparency” was a pattern, suggesting that toxic leaders have difficulty forming trusting relationships with others.

Early indicators. A key purpose in this investigation was to observe whether there might be early indicators of toxic leadership. A reliable list of early indicators might help organizations to avoid toxic leadership in the first place. Or, failing that, it might help organizations to identify toxic leadership early enough to avert a trajectory of organizational decline. Several findings emerged from participants’ responses. First, of the 36 responses to the question, “How long did it take you to realize that this person was a toxic leader,” all but five reported that the toxic behavior was obvious within one year or less. Moreover, half reported that the toxic behavior began to reveal itself within a few months. In only two cases, however, participants indicated that the toxic behavior was evident during the interview process. These findings suggest that toxic leaders are adept at gauging their audiences during interviews. One participant commented on the seductive qualities of the toxic leader during the interview: “He enchanted us . . . sparkling personality . . . said all the right things . . . staff heard what they wanted to hear and school board heard they wanted to hear . . . we did not see the charade until too late.” Another participant’s comments noted how skilled the toxic leader was during the interview: “She was too perfect in the interview . . . [but she] revealed her true self within a month.” Thus, the data from this investigation provided little information for how to spot the toxic leader during the interview process. However, it did reveal that schools and colleges could be surprised by the outcome.

Notwithstanding, participants did provide useful information on how they first became alerted to the early toxic leadership once the leader was on the job. Table 4 depicts their observations, which are sorted in the same four categories previously used to describe toxic leadership (i.e., egotism, ethical failure, incompetence, and neuroticism). As noted in the previous paragraph, these behaviors became endemic within the first year and many times within a just few months.

Table 4

Early Indicators of Toxic Leadership

Egotism	Ethical failure	Incompetence	Neuroticism
Imperial behavior, e.g. making people wait unnecessarily long to schedule appointments	Bogus strategic planning, i.e., rush to have a “new” plan while short-circuiting the process	Rush to judgment for all decisions	Mood swings
Collecting marginally competent “yes” people for inner circle	Bogus empowerment – committees and/or task forces formed to rubber stamp predetermined priorities	Avoiding difficult decisions	
Keeps score on those who do not offer full support	Corruption of the administrator and/or faculty search and selection process	Overuse of sound bites and/or buzz words/phrases	
Dominates discussion in all meetings; does not listen to counsel	Marginalizing competent people – discrediting those perceived as opponents		
Preoccupation with projects best described as “window dressing”			
Overuse of first person pronoun (“I”); seldom uses third person “we”			
Abrasive behavior; frequent use of sarcasm, harsh criticism			
Preoccupation with the perquisites of the position			

While participants were able to identify some of the behaviors that they observed as harbingers of the toxic leadership that followed, a word of caution is necessary. The data collection procedures utilized an open-ended question; and, obviously, the observations are subjective in their nature. However, qualitative analysis of the responses revealed that toxic leaders will exhibit multiple toxic behaviors.

Discussion

Several conclusions are warranted by the data from this investigation. First, toxic leadership occurs with high frequency in educational organizations, just as it does in other types of organizations (Bullis & Reed, as cited in Williams, 2005; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Solfield & Salmond, 2003). Moreover, the consequences are insidious – key employees are marginalized and demoralized – and progress toward institutional mission is impeded.

Further, the evidence shows that the behaviors of toxic leaders are concrete. In the open-ended responses participants described toxic leadership in terms of what toxic leaders did, especially how they interacted with others. Based on the descriptions given in response to the open-ended questions and corroborated responses to the *Toxic Leadership Scale*, four categories of toxic leadership emerged: (a) Egotism, (b) Ethical Failure, (c) Incompetence, and (d) Neuroticism. Although, reflection on the behaviors that fall within these categories reveals that they are not taxonomic. The categories overlap. For example, ethical failure has in part (if not all) its origin in egotism. Similarly, incompetence in human relations skills might reflect such a high degree of self-centeredness that no effort is given to applying them. Likewise again, manipulation of others can be an indicator of a neurotic condition and, arguably, it also is ethically objectionable. In other words these four categories of toxic leadership probably are better viewed as fields within an array of toxic leadership behaviors, and the interconnections form a complex network. A much more sophisticated research design than was the intent of this investigation will be needed to explore how these toxic leadership behaviors associate with one another.

Finally, the evidence suggests that toxic leadership is seductive. Participants reported how some were highly skilled at disguising their toxic behaviors when they interviewed for their positions. This point emerges from one of the purposes of the investigation – to identify early indicators. The only conclusion that is warranted by the evidence is that early indicators will begin to become obvious after the toxic leader is on the job (see Table 4); but prior to then they are not easily observable. Moreover, those behaviors that might be indicative of the potential for toxic leadership are going to be viewed through subjective filters.

Of course, every investigation has its limitations and this one is no exception. Given the low response rate (17%, N = 51), this study can be viewed merely as exploratory. Moreover, the emotionally charged nature of the topic probably discouraged some of those whom were invited from participating. And, some of those who did choose to participate may have used the survey as an opportunity to simply ventilate latent hostilities, rather than reflect upon their experiences. Even so, the data portray a stark reality that toxic leadership is prevalent and it conforms to observable patterns of behavior.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Indeed, toxic leadership is present in educational organizations – 90% of the participants in this investigation reported previous or current experience with a toxic leader. This incidence of toxic leadership in schools, colleges, and universities compares to the

frequency of toxic leadership reported in business, healthcare, and military organizations. The profiles of toxic leaders will vary, but the characteristics fall into a set of categories, namely, (a) egotism, (b) ethical failure, (c) incompetence, and (d) neuroticism. Also, early indicators of toxic leadership frequently surface within the first year, but they are difficult to observe in the selection process.

These points taken together argue on behalf of greater attention given to training personnel involved in the search and selection of leaders. Faculty and other administrators who assist in the screening of candidates need more knowledge of the research behind effective leadership and the methods developed by organizational psychologists for identifying persons with leadership potential. Likewise, they need to be more knowledgeable of the increasing attention given to research on toxic leadership. Indeed, there is even a case for appropriate use of qualified consultants (i.e., personnel specialists with expertise in organizational leadership) during the search and selection process.

Finally, since this investigation was intended to be exploratory in nature, the researcher is more than willing to acknowledge its limitations, previously mentioned. The findings do, however, support the need for more research into the area. Specifically, the researcher recommends an in-depth qualitative study of a sample of toxic leaders of sufficient size to attain data saturation, with three or more participants providing information on the same toxic leader for triangulation, with emphasis on clues embedded in the search and selection process.

Leadership is a paradox. The very attributes that describe effective leaders can corrode into qualities that we associate with toxic leadership. For example, “Arrogance,” one of the hallmarks of toxic leadership shares much in common “self-confidence,” which is a trait shared by effective leaders. But we know that they are not the same. The arrogance of a toxic leader is offensive to subordinates, but the self-confidence of an effective leader inspires trust. If members of organizations are to be any better at finding talented leaders for their organizations, they will also need to be acknowledge this paradox and become more astute at ferreting out the toxic leaders who reside in the same pool of candidates. At the very minimum, personnel who participate in the search and selection process for leaders will require training in the research from organizational psychology on methods for assessing leadership potential, as well as detecting toxic leaders in waiting.

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