

IMPACT OF A TOXIC LEADER ON EMERGENCY SERVICES

BRET IRONS

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

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The effects of toxic leadership can affect the efficiency needed to operate in the complex world of emergency services. It only takes a minute to find information on leadership, but information on toxic leadership and the effects it has on subordinates is almost non-existent. In today’s world, people want to graduate from college and move right into a position of management.

Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. This leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves. The negative leader completes short-term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfill requests. This may achieve results in the short term, but ignores the other leader competency categories of leads and develops.

Prolonged use of negative leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale. (Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 as cited in Wilson, 2014)

It is hard to imagine a leader that would put their needs before the needs of their subordinates. Without employees, there is no need for a supervisor. Dr. Jason Selk (n.d.) recommends to "Find a way, no matter what, to prioritize your goals, even when you have a viable excuse to justify not doing them." Selk goes as far as to suggest that helping others should only be considered after one has completed their prioritized goals. This type of guidance can only plant a seed that will eventually lead to a toxic leader. The majority of the self-help books on leadership recommend placing individual needs or wants above all others. This is right out of the definition of a toxic leader's self-centered attitude and motivations.

Most toxic leaders are skilled at hiding what is happening to their subordinates while making themselves look good to their supervisors, placing the priority on their goals above all other requests. According to Linda Fisher Thornton, there are thirteen side effects of a toxic leader:

Low productivity, low morale, rampant fear, high stress, decreased learning, employees become detached and insulated to protect themselves, detached employees help each other less and don't communicate as proactively, lack of proactive communication and teamwork leads to diminished company reputation, employees fail to find meaning in their work, people dread what each day may bring, trust in the organization is lost, people leave generating high turnover, and the ripple effect from ... [all of the above] to deteriorating organizational results. (2014)

One thing that can come from these side effects is a change in an organization's culture. If allowed to go on long enough, the cancerous culture can remain long after a leadership change.

To maintain control, a toxic leader will attack employees in public to gain the maximum effects of humiliation and fear. Employees are not allowed a chance to respond or defend these public attacks. Goldman states, "Employees deemed insufficient, inadequate or failing are not to be empowered within a toxic organizational system or provided any tangible means for self-improvement and enhancement" (2011), and it is easy to see how this approach further adds to low morale and turnover in an organization.

Maslow's basic building block of physiological motivation, the hierarchy of needs, is destroyed for individuals under a toxic leader. Common suggestions for dealing with toxic leadership include, "avoid criticizing them, show admiration, and don't outshine them; play down your accomplishments and ambitions, document your work ... and keep your eye open for other positions" (Lubit, 2004). If individuals gain any esteem, they are required to hide it so not to be deemed insubordinate. The majority of subordinates want safety and security in their employment. Because employees are unable to meet the basic needs of security under a toxic leader, their mistrust of others slows or even stops communication. The lack of communication greatly affects an individual's chances of developing a sense of belonging and confidence in their position.

In the world of emergency services, employees need to have the confidence to work and make decisions in high-pressure environments. They need to know that they have the support of their supervisor. A lack of support will inevitably affect a team working under these conditions. "Toxic leaders do not add value to the organizations they lead, even if the unit performs successfully on their watch. They do not engender high levels of confidence that lead to unit cohesion and esprit de corps" (Reed, 2004). Consider a fire crew advancing on a burning building with a viable life they can save, only for the victim to pass away because the crew must wait on supervisor approval before going in because a toxic leader is fearful that the crew might get hurt and make the leader look bad. A mass casualty scene would be completely unmanageable if the paramedic on scene felt they had to validate the triage of every EMT. How many lives would be lost because the paramedic felt the EMTs might push forward a patient that would die while the paramedics were working on them?

Emergency services personnel need to have the ability to think on the fly and make critical time-sensitive decisions. A toxic leader who believes that "Employees who are ranked beneath a toxic leader are identified as operating at a distinct disadvantage and they should be treated accordingly" (Goldman, 2011) can delay efficient action with their need to micromanage the group. This type of leadership style has no place in the world of emergency services. Individuals working in this environment need to be provided as much training as possible, and then be allowed to exercise rapid judgment based on their training.

The effects of toxic leadership can influence the efficiency needed to operate in the complex world of emergency services. Taking valuable time to consider if each decision will make the leader look bad will only create safety issues along with

increasing the chance of loss of life. In a world of tragedy and loss, pride and group fellowship are invaluable things that allow an emergency worker to show up day after day.

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