

Investigating Allegations of TOXIC LEADERSHIP

A substantiated finding of “toxic leadership” can lead to several undesirable consequences—relief from position, a referred OER, and administrative or punitive discipline. A substantiated finding of “toxic leadership” often times means that a leader has left broken personnel and a unit in distress. As such, investigations into toxic leadership should not be undertaken lightly.

Before a leader can be labelled as “toxic”, there must be a solid underlying administrative investigation upon which senior leaders can review, understand, and use to make difficult decisions.

In order to ensure that leaders are properly labelled as “toxic” and that appropriate action is taken, the detailed investigating officer (IO), and his or her legal advisor, must understand what “toxic leadership” is and how to properly investigate it.

In order to create adequate investigations, IOs must:

1. Define the term “toxic leader”;
2. Understand the base characteristics of a “toxic leader”;
3. Develop facts through engaged questioning of witnesses;
4. Draft deliberate and well-reasoned findings.

1. DEFINE THE TERM.

The terms “toxic leader” and “toxic leadership” are frequently bantered around. These terms are used so frequently, that the definition of “toxic leader” is different from Soldier to Soldier. Because the definition varies so widely, it is paramount that the IO defines the term so that all witnesses operate off of the same definition throughout an investigation. Taking an “I know it when I see it” approach, is unacceptable. The term must be defined and explained. “Toxic leadership” has been discussed in several publications; however, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 on Leadership provides a good place to start.

ADP 6-22, Leadership.

Paragraph 11. “Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. The leader lacks concerns 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 the 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.”

2. UNDERSTAND THE BASE CHARACTERISTICS OF TOXICITY.

Although it is conceivable that a leader might display all characteristics of a toxic leader, more commonly, a leader will exhibit one or two characteristics. As such, the IO must distill their operating definition into characteristics of a toxic leader and focus on the particular traits that are relevant to their investigation.

In addition to understanding what traits or actions a leader displays, it is equally important for a leader to understand the impact those traits and actions have on the unit and morale. The IO must understand that in order for actions to be toxic, those actions must have a negative impact on Soldiers, morale, and on the overall well-being of the unit. Undesirable actions, without a negative impact on the unit, will not necessarily lead to a substantiated finding of “toxic leadership.”

In sum, defining toxic leadership is a **two-part test**:

1. The leader must display “toxic” characteristics or traits, and
2. These characteristics or traits must have a negative or detrimental impact on personnel, morale, or the unit.

If we examine the definition from the ADP 6-22 we will see that it is comprised of both **traits** and **consequences**:

- **Lack of concern for others and the climate of the organization**, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects.
- **Leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest.**
- **Leader consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves.**
- **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 leads and develops.
- **Negative leadership to influence followers** undermines the followers will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale.

3. DEVELOP FACTS THROUGH ENGAGED QUESTIONING OF WITNESSES.

Facts are critical to finding a leader “toxic.” IOs must take time to carefully cultivate facts. Consider the following:

Q: Investigating Officer
A: SPC William Snuffy
Q: Is CPT John Doe a toxic leader?
A: Yes.

Without further follow-up, this line of questioning is not helpful because it does not develop the necessary facts to make a reasoned finding of toxic leadership. This line of questioning asks Soldiers to draw a legal conclusion, a task which has been assigned to the IO.

Instead the IO should be asking questions that will help them:

1. Identify what specific actions a leader has taken that have been perceived as “toxic.” The IO should explore general characteristics of a toxic leadership and identify specific examples.
2. Identify the negative consequences that these actions has had on Soldiers and unit morale.

Ensuring that facts are properly developed is labor intensive and requires the IO to pay attention to witness answers and ask necessary follow-up questions. A better line of questioning might be:

Q: Investigating Officer
A: SPC William Snuffy
Q: How is unit morale?
A: Low.
Q: Why is unit morale low?
A: Because I feel our Commander doesn't care.
Q: Why do you feel that way?
A: Because he doesn't allow us to do our MOS.
Q: What job are you doing if you are not doing your MOS?
A: Well, he has me watching his three children during the day.
--OR--
Q: Investigating Officer
A: SPC William Snuffy
Q: How is unit morale?
A: Low.
Q: Why is unit morale low?
A: Because our platoon leader is mean to us.
Q: How is he mean to you?
A: He required us to come in on the weekend.
Q: For what reason?
A: To do inventories.
Q: Why did you have to do inventories over the weekend?
A: We have a change of command next week and we are missing tools.

From these statements, the IO can identify the action (making a Soldier provide day care service or making Soldiers come in over the weekend for inventories) and consequences (low morale, undeveloped Soldiers, missing weekend). The IO can also identify if the leader's actions were done for an

official reasons or out of self-interest. Well-developed facts are more useful to make findings and offer recommendations. Well-developed facts are more useful for senior leaders.

4. MAKE DELIBERATE AND WELL-REASONED FINDINGS.

A leader should not be found to be “toxic” because the IO polled the unit and a majority of the Soldiers voted “yes.”

A finding of toxicity must be supported by facts. These facts must detail the leader's actions (or inaction) and the impact that his or her action (or inaction) has had on his or her organization. Additionally, the finding must explain to the appointing authority what attributes of a toxic leader this particular leader displays.

An IO must understand that not all cases of dissatisfaction in a unit means that the leader is toxic. The IO must be deliberate in his finding and must specifically identify why the conduct is more properly characterized as “toxic” instead of as a hard decision a leader made that his or her subordinates were unhappy with. The IO must identify whether the leadership style is truly “toxic” (where there is no benefit from the leader's conduct) or if the leadership style is demanding, assertive, or stern (where there is an organizational benefit, but the style may be disagreeable) or confused or incompetent (where there is little organizational benefit, but the actions are not perceived as ill-willed).

EXAMPLES/DISCUSSION.

Example 1. A Soldier said he felt “[I]like the kid that was picked last for kickball in school . . . I get the jobs that nobody wanted to do. Take out the trash, you're going to sweep the floor, you're going to mop the hallway. And it's like, why?”

Discussion. If the Soldier is a senior NCO and is being directed to do these duties with no identified reason, there may be an issue. However, it is a different story, if the Soldier is a junior enlisted Soldier who is directed to do these duties as part of a regular duty rotation or as part of extra duty as a result of an Article 15 and is unhappy about these tasks.

Example 2. A commander belittles Soldiers, occasionally throws things during meetings, and sometimes storms out unit gatherings.

Discussion. The IO will need to evaluate the totality of the circumstances to determine whether this conduct is “toxic”. The IO will need to determine if this is an on-going, relentless, situation or if the commander is well meaning, but operates out of frustration and confusion.

