

A Response to “Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses”

(Military Review Online Exclusive, November 2017)

Maj. Alex Willard, U.S. Army

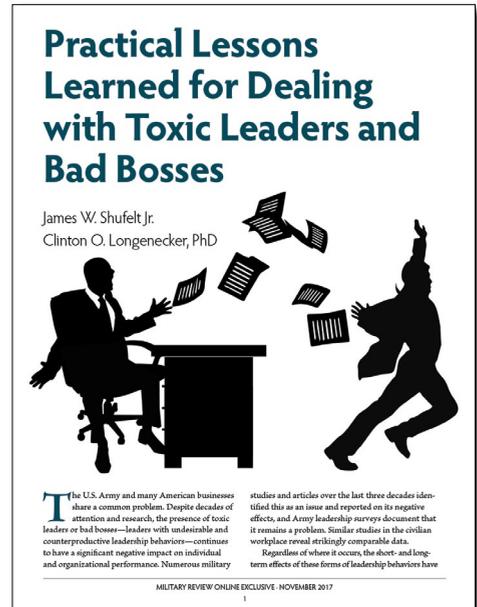
On 28 November 2017, the Army University Press published “[Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses](#),” an article written by James Shufelt and Clinton Longenecker in which they offer advice to unfortunate Army personnel forced to serve under a bad boss or a toxic leader.¹ The authors’ thesis is that employees of all organizations will work for a bad boss or toxic leader at some point in their career, and Army doctrine does not offer many suggestions for dealing with this situation, so they offer lessons learned derived from eleven key findings distilled from one of the author’s extensive field research. While these key findings are generally good leadership advice, the authors’ fundamental misunderstanding of the terms “bad bosses” and “toxic leaders” leaves the reader confused and negates the utility of their proposed lessons learned.

Words Mean Things

The primary flaw in Shufelt and Longenecker’s article is their inability to clearly define the terms they use; doing so leads to very different practical

solutions. Army doctrine dedicates over one hundred pages in two separate publications to leadership and leadership policy, but cannot muster even one page on the topic of toxic leadership.² Moreover, even the passing references to toxic leadership do not share a consistent definition of the term.³ The abridged nature of this important but complex topic should not be surprising, given that the Army’s regulation for publishing doctrine warns writers to “avoid abstract or overly academic writing” and “use the standardized language of joint and Army doctrine.”⁴ With these restrictive guidelines, using Army doctrine to solve difficult problems will lead to overly simplistic and ultimately unhelpful solutions.

Instead, Shufelt and Longenecker need to consider academic research on toxic leadership by reading peer-reviewed articles that



To view the original article, please visit <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Practical-Lessons/>.

Maj. Alex Willard, U.S. Army, is an Army strategist who works in the Commander’s Initiatives Group at U.S. Army South. He holds a BA in history from Furman University. His assignments include deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Liberia.

disaggregate the components of each term to come up with better solutions. For example, Birgit Schyns and Jan Schilling's article on the effects of toxic leadership accurately distinguishes the components and consequences of a toxic leader from a bad boss.⁵ Toxic leaders are clearly bad bosses because their actions are detrimental to individuals and organizations, while the actions of bad bosses lead to ineffective or inefficient organizations, but are not personally or organizationally damaging.

For example, bad bosses can practice *laissez-faire* leadership, aka nonleadership.⁶ In practice, this looks like a leader who does not give good guidance, is more of a figurehead than a supervisor, and is disengaged from employees and the day-to-day running of an organization. While this boss is likely ineffective, and therefore a bad boss, he or she is not necessarily a toxic leader because that person isn't "deceiving, intimidating, coercing, or unfairly punishing."⁷

Another type of bad boss is the supportive-disloyal leader. This person "shows too much consideration for the welfare of followers while violating organizational goal attainment."⁸ Said another way, they prioritize their employees over their organization and the mission. In the military, this could look like a commander who does not complete the mission because he was excessively afraid of the possibility of casualties. His or her ineffectiveness clearly makes that person a bad boss, but not necessarily a toxic leader.

In contrast, toxic leaders are completely different from bad bosses. In fact, while there is still some debate in academic circles about what to call a toxic leader, the majority of academic research refers to toxic leadership as abusive supervision.⁹ One useful definition is, "a process in which over a longer period of time the activities, experiences and/or relationships of an individual or the members of a group are repeatedly influenced by their supervisor in a way that is perceived as hostile and/or obstructive."¹⁰ When faced with a situation that fits the above description, what options do Army personnel really have?

A Void of Helpful Solutions

Shufelt and Longenecker's first ten key findings are good general recommendations for anyone dealing with a bad, ineffective boss, but they do nothing to address working for a toxic leader who repeatedly inflicts harm on individuals and organizations. Their final

recommendation, "know when it's time to go," condones one toxic employee pushing out good employees.¹¹ If the goal of talent management is identifying, developing, retaining, and promoting the right people into the right positions, then Shufelt and Longenecker's eleventh key finding is anathema to the long-term effectiveness of the Army.

Unfortunately, at present, toxic leaders are often allowed to remain in the Army, not because their bosses are oblivious to their toxicity, but because the bosses care more about the accomplishment of short-term goals than the long-term individual and organizational health of the institutions over which they have responsibility.¹² Under such circumstances, confronting a toxic leader may often not only be regarded as an affront to the offending individual, but also as an affront and personal slight to the rater who oversees such an individual. In such a command environment, Army personnel serving under a toxic leader should tread carefully; in the current zero-defect Army mentality, one negative Officer Evaluation Report can ruin a career. Similarly, even indirect, passive actions like requesting to change jobs or talking to a trusted senior officer outside the chain of command carries real career risk. Additionally, because the Army spends so little time defining toxic leadership—much less advising personnel what to do when they encounter it—any official reporting of it can be brushed aside as nothing more than a personality disagreement.

The Army should initiate organizational changes to counter toxic leadership, but it will take courage and commitment in the face of entrenched legacy attitudes. For example, a renewed commitment to creating an enforceable, useful peer-review program within the Army would help unmask and weed out toxic leaders earlier in their careers to the overall benefit of the organization and its personal development process.¹³ Many Army personnel thoughtlessly ridicule peer reviews as wastes of time, but they work well in Ranger School, amongst general officers, and even at Google.¹⁴ Persons who are inclined to toxic leadership methods are likely especially opposed.

Second, dedicating time and smart people to better educate the entire force by enhancing current doctrine must also be part of the solution. Third, initiating a direct reporting line would help foster individuals' willingness to report instances of toxic leadership. Finally, leaders at all levels must impart the value of candor to their formations by actually demonstrating it during

formal counseling with their subordinates. The previous suggestions will undoubtedly incur organizational costs, but the long-term gains associated with investing in people will far outweigh the costs.

By comparison, the current lack of organizationally structured measures or guidance by Army leadership to enhance leader accountability means there is no real guidance on how to deal with a toxic leader in the military. Until that void is filled, Army personnel have little recourse but to accept many of Shufelt and Longenecker's

recommendations that exhort persons to be individually proactive by striving to focus on solving difficult problems of the organization irrespective of the toxic environment suffered, while also showing military respect to the office your toxic boss may hold.¹⁵ Focus on your work, make those around you better, learn from your experiences, keep your head down, hope the Army gives you better future bosses, silently endure, and read academic journals, not doctrine, to learn more about the organizational value of talent management. ■

Notes

1. James W. Shufelt Jr. and Clinton O. Longenecker, "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses," *Military Review* (November 2017, online exclusive), accessed 15 December 2017, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Practical-Lessons/>.

2. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 1 August 2012), para. 3-35, 7-12; Army Regulation 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 5 April 2017), secs. 1-11.d and 1-11.e.

3. *Ibid.* ADRP 6-22 says "Extreme and consistent forms of these undesirable behaviors indicate a toxic or abusive leader." AR 600-100 calls toxic leadership "counterproductive," and defines it as "a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance."

4. Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation 25-36, *The TRADOC Doctrine Publication Program* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 4 September 2012), sec. 3-7.e.

5. Birgit Schyns and Jan Schilling, "How Bad Are the Effects of Bad Leaders? A Meta-analysis of Destructive Leadership and its Outcomes," *The Leadership Quarterly* 24 (2013): 138-58.

6. *Ibid.*, 142.

7. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1 August 2012), 3.

8. Schyns and Schilling, "How Bad Are the Effects of Bad Leaders?," 141.

9. *Ibid.*, 145. Many individuals reject terms like toxic leader as an oxymoron, believing that a leader, by definition, cannot be toxic or bad, but only impart positive characteristics on his or her personnel and organization.

10. Gary A. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Prentice, 2006).

11. Shufelt and Longenecker, "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses."

12. Denise Williams, "Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Army," (research paper, U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 18 March 2015), accessed 20 December 2017, <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/ksil3.pdf>. There are not only psychological and emotional consequences of toxic leadership, but also physical reactions to it. This finding is detailed in Vicki Webster, Paula Brough, and Kathleen Daly, "Fight, Flight or Freeze: Common Response for Follower Coping with Toxic Leadership" *Stress and Health* 32, no. 4 (October 2016): 346-54.

13. The current MSAF (multi-source assessment feedback aka 360 evaluation) system is not electronically linked to the Officer Evaluation Report system, making it possible for officers to lie about initiating, much less completing, an assessment.

14. It is well documented that positive peer reviews are mandatory to progress from one phase of Ranger School to the next; Chaitra M. Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments: Are They the Right Tool for the U.S. Military* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2015). According to this RAND report, general officers conduct a 360 report when they are promoted to two-, three-, and four-star positions, and the Army General Officer Management Office reviews the results looking for potential red flags; According to numerous sources, including Francisco S. homem de Mello, "Case Study: How Google does Performance Reviews," *Google's Performance Management Practices* (Palo Alto, CA: Qulture.Rocks, 2015), accessed 15 December 2017, <http://www.qulture.rocks/blog/googles-performance-management-practices-part-1>, Google uses an Annual Upward Feedback Survey where personnel review their first-line supervisor based on strengths, weaknesses, and contributions to specific projects.

15. Shufelt and Longenecker "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses."