



Coping with a Toxic Leader **Bruce E. Roselle**

Search for ‘toxic leader’ on the internet and you will find everywhere from four to 10 characteristics or traits of toxic leadership. Some articles identify psychological traits: autocratic, narcissistic, overly competitive, manipulative, and intimidating. Others describe behaviors: bullying, sense of entitlement, lying and inconsistency, lack of listening, lack of moral compass, and self-promoting. Still others use characteristics and attitudinal descriptors: arrogant, not confident, rigid, callous, insular, incompetent, hierarchical, and discriminatory.

This is quite a poisonous picture of ineffective leader behaviors. My guess, from working with hundreds of executives, is that no one wakes up in the morning and looks forward to being a toxic leader at work. In fact, when leaders I’ve coached receive 360 degree feedback that uses words like these to describe their behavior, they become agitated and defensive—some to the point of tears.

How toxicity develops. If no one starts out desiring to become a toxic leader that makes others sick and generates high turnover, then how does toxicity develop? Just like rust on your automobile or cholesterol in your arteries, it develops in small deposits over time. However, there are usually some precipitating incidents from early life that set the toxic ball rolling.

For most people, a fearful incident or series of them in childhood threatens the need we each have to be loved and accepted, valued and significant, and safe from harm. In those moments of fear, we generate theories of how to protect ourselves going forward. Because we usually produce these beliefs before age 7, when we first have the ability to think logically, they are automatically irrational. These theories include ones like: “I need to be shy and pull back to make sure I’m not rejected,” “To be seen as competent, I must prove that I am smart and make sure I get all the credit,” or “I must make sure people around me are not seen as more competent than me, or I may be fired and replaced.” On a deep level, toxic leaders feel like a fraud in the role, and they are working very hard to compensate.

Why do toxic leaders remain in place? Usually because they offer a high level of competence or brilliance in one area that the organization views as too important to lose. Consequently, they make excuses for the behavior, work around the person when possible, and accept the fact that there will be higher turnover from this person's department. For example, in providing feedback a number of years ago to a CFO, we both could see clearly that his toxic behaviors contributed to lower scores in his emotional intelligence. However, when we looked at the section where others indicated how important they thought it was for him to change these behaviors, very few identified that as a compelling need. In other words, they saw that his behaviors were toxic and ineffective, but did not see it as a priority for him to change.

What can you do with a toxic leader? Here are some ideas for individuals who work for a toxic boss, as well as organizations that employ one:

Individuals: recognize that their toxic behaviors are not the result of anything you have said or done. That is, the foundation for the toxicity was laid long before they met you. Toxic leaders are frightened leaders who have developed ineffective behaviors to cover their irrational fears. Try not to let your own fears and faulty beliefs cause you to react to these people, but, rather, take a breath and respond to them as calmly and rationally as you can. Follow up conversations with an email to summarize your understanding of the decisions made (this helps clarify communication and document the interaction). Whenever they do or say anything that seems supportive of you, acknowledge them and thank them (this helps move them in the direction you would like to see them become). Keep Human Resources informed of their toxic behaviors and how you are trying to work effectively with them.

Organizations: recognize that toxic leaders can have a very negative effect on your bottom line, through demoralized attitudes and low productivity on the part of the team, as well as high turnover and the cost of replacing team members who choose to leave. Take seriously the complaints of people around them and conduct impartial HR evaluations of the veracity of claims. Administer a 360 degree feedback instrument, making sure raters are assured that their specific responses are confidential. Provide in-depth feedback on the instrument and use it to create a development plan. Hire an executive coach who is competent and confident enough to dig into the underlying dynamics of this toxic behavior to ensure that the individual will gain insight about the irrational fears and faulty beliefs, as well as develop new leadership strategies. Make certain the individual is held accountable for the behavior change identified.