

Why Do Toxic Leaders Survive

By Andrew Schmidt; May 6, 2015

In my previous posts, I discussed what toxic leadership is and how toxic leaders get into supervisory roles. Here I will explain why toxic leaders survive, even when they are clearly bad for individuals, teams, and organizations.

Toxic Leaders Deliver Results: Unfortunately, toxic leaders survive because they tend to deliver excellent short-term results. The public humiliation, micromanagement, and other toxic behaviors motivate employees to work hard and avoid being punished. From the perspective of a senior executive, the toxic leader is meeting his goals so everything seems on track. Just looking at the bottom line, things appear to be fine. Toxic leadership isn't noticeable until you look at how the work is being accomplished, at the morale of the team, and at the long-term sustainability of the workers.

I coached a toxic leader who could not keep anyone on her team for longer than one year. Her 12-month retention rate was close to zero. But within that year, she got lots of work out of everyone she managed. Senior leaders thought she was great at "special projects" because she could always deliver on tight timelines. They weren't paying attention to what happened after each project ended and most of the team members quit. By that time, she had moved on to a new "special project" and the cycle continued.

My research [1] showed that toxic leadership includes dimensions of self-promotion and narcissism, which both contribute to the leader's survival. These leaders deflect blame, take credit for good results (even if the credit should be shared), and genuinely believe they deserve all the rewards. From a senior executive's perspective, the toxic leader is not associated with mistakes and accepts credit for successes, so why make a change?

Rooting out Toxic Leadership from the Top: After collecting data from more than 6,000 people on this topic, it's clear to me that toxic leadership must be eliminated from the top. One of my favorite mantras is "What gets rewarded gets repeated." If senior executives are not focused on how the work is getting done, then toxic leaders will flourish beneath them.

I worked with a CEO who knew there were several toxic leaders in his organization. We reviewed the results of an annual employee engagement survey and identified one unit with low scores and lots of negative comments describing the supervisor's toxic behaviors. When I asked for more details about this team's dynamic, the CEO told me, "We should ignore this. That team is under a lot stress so the scores don't really count." I advised him that teams are often under stress, and by ignoring their survey responses, he was sending his employees a message that toxic leadership was acceptable in his organization. By failing to intervene, the CEO was tacitly endorsing the way his employees were being treated.

Toxic Leadership Trickles Down: This CEO was also setting an example for future behaviors that would be expected among emerging leaders in the company. It's surprising how easily these subtle cues can shape an organization's culture. I once interviewed a Navy officer who was warm and engaging with me, but also known as a toxic leader at work. He told me that he goes to work and becomes "a tyrant" and is relieved to get home and be his "friendly self." When I asked why he made such a deliberate change, he replied, "On my ship, the a**hole always wins. The bigger the a**hole, the more wins. If I want to get promoted, I have to act that way."

Research has shown that toxic behaviors among senior managers was positively related to a similar leadership style among front-line supervisors, and those bad behaviors were positively related to interpersonal deviance among employees. [2] This "trickle-down" model explains how toxic leadership can be replicated downward throughout the organization.

Bad Impressions Generalize Up: Since employees usually have more contact with their direct supervisor than any other authority in the company, employees use that leader's behavior to interpret how the organization feels about them. [3] Not surprisingly, my research [4] found that higher levels of toxic leadership were related to lower levels of organizational trust and commitment. Allowing toxic leadership to persist, even through permissive inaction, communicates to employees that they are not valued or respected by the organization at large. In many of my interviews, people generalized their experiences with a single toxic leader to the culture and conduct of the entire company.

If senior executives want to avoid toxic leadership, they need to set the right example from the very top. Toxic behaviors should be corrected, even when the leader is achieving good results. Employees need to see that these behaviors are noticed and actively discouraged, lest they adopt a toxic style too. What gets rewarded gets repeated.

In my next post, I'll describe some actions employees can take if they report to a toxic leader.

<http://blog.shrm.org/blog/why-do-toxic-leaders-survive>