

Toxic Leadership in the United States Marine Corps

by

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Abstract

Toxic leadership is a term commonly used in the civilian workforce and military services to describe destructive and counterproductive leaders who do more to damage their institutions than ensure their success. Many service members experience this type of leader throughout their career. Some see them as a tough nosed leader with a singular mission focus. However, the fine line between tough and toxic leader is easily crossed. In the United States Marine Corps (USMC), the problem of toxic leadership is known, but there is no established definition to help identify toxicity within our ranks. This paper will attempt to examine the impact of toxic leadership within the USMC and will also provide a clear definition of a toxic leader for use in the USMC as well as some ideas on how to assess toxic leaders. Additionally, it will identify some preventative measures to compliment current training and provide possible remediation efforts to correct toxic tendencies before they impact the larger force, including what the USMC can do when it identifies an Officer as toxic.

Toxic Leadership in the United States Marine Corps

In the spring of 2017, the Officers and Senior Enlisted Advisors from across II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF), joined the Commanding General, II MEF at the Officers' Club at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. At this gathering, the Commanding General told the gathered leadership to "get after toxic leaders." However, he provided no definition or standards to identify a toxic leader, nor any way to address them once they were found. These leaders were simply told to find them and take care of it. Toxic leadership is a term commonly used in the civilian workforce and military services to describe destructive and counterproductive leaders who do more to damage their institutions than ensure their success. Many service members experience this type of leader at some time in their career. Some see them as a tough nosed leader with a singular mission focus. However, the fine line between tough and toxic leader is easily crossed. In the United States Marine Corps (USMC), the problem of toxic leadership is known, but there is no established definition to help identify toxicity within our ranks¹. This lack of a definition to help identify a toxic leader makes addressing these individuals difficult as the traits of a poor leader can be subject to personal interpretation. There are also few tools provided the Marine Officers to remediate toxic tendencies as they progress through their career.

Throughout a Marine Officer's career, they receive hours of instructions on leadership, ethics and morality, starting at Officer Candidates School and continuing throughout their time in the Marine Corps, and this does not include any lessons or periods of instruction they may receive from their commissioning source or as an enlisted Marine. All Marines are mentored, encouraged and reminded to act as an ethical and morally straight leader, never surrendering the moral high ground, always

holding themselves to the highest possible standards so they can emulate the USMC values of Honor, Courage and Commitment.

So how is it that the USMC was forced to relieve almost one hundred commanders over the course of nearly twenty years for various reasons, ranging from command climate and misconduct to safety and accountability issues?² How is it that the repeated lessons these leaders received over time never resonated with them as they developed in their career? How are these leaders placed into strategically important billets throughout the USMC, and some are only discovered as toxic after they are in place? With the USMC being the smallest service in the Department of Defense, each and every Battalion and Regimental commander can be considered a leader with strategic impact as they often deploy around the world for training and combat. The influence on the unit created by a toxic leader creates a ripple effect that manifests itself in decreased effectiveness, personnel readiness and struggles with retention.

Battalion Squadron, Regimental and Group Commanders are slated through the USMC command selection process, thoroughly vetted and hand selected for the honor of commanding the young men and women of America. However, once in command, some create a hostile, uncomfortable and toxic environment so extreme that USMC strategic leadership is forced to remove these Officers from their positions. Were these Officers toxic before they took command, or did the stress of command turn them toxic? What, if anything in their professional record could have identified toxic characteristics before they were slated for command? What is the metric used within the USMC to determine a leader's toxic tendencies? Again, to this last point, there is not one, at least not yet. This paper will attempt to examine the impact of toxic leadership within the

USMC and will also provide a clear definition of a toxic leader for use in the USMC as well as some ideas on how to assess toxic leaders. Additionally, it will identify some preventative measures to compliment current training and provide possible remediation efforts to correct toxic tendencies before they impact the larger force, including what the USMC can do when it identifies an Officer as toxic. This paper will limit its focus to USMC Officers and not enlisted Marines, however some of these ideas and concepts could be applied to enlisted Marines as well.

Recognizing the Problem

This author does not believe the USMC attempts to conceal or ignore toxic leadership problems within its Officer ranks. However, reviewing data pertaining to the reliefs of USMC Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels from 2000 to 2017, it would seem there are a significant number of toxic or poor leadership cases in the USMC. A total of 24 of 93 commanders were relieved between 2000 and 2017 for command climate related issues.³ This equates to an average of 1.33 commanders, both Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel, per year relieved for command as a result of climate issues.⁴ The details of these reliefs are not specifically available to the author, so it must be noted that some of these reliefs may not be entirely related to toxicity in the command, but open source reporting shows the majority of recent reliefs were a result of toxic and abusive leadership. If you include the number of commanders relieved for misconduct, which can arguably be linked to toxic behavior, then the total number doubles to 51.⁵ This number is disturbing in and of itself, but even more so as the USMC has relatively few command opportunities for Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels when compared to other services.

Examining the data reveals a rising trend in reliefs for misconduct or command climate from 2000 to 2017. Causal factors for this trend are not readily apparent. There was no corresponding focus on commandership or leadership within the Officer corps that would have brought extra scrutiny on the behavior of commanders. Units from across the USMC actively deployed in support of combat operations, however these commanders were not relieved during combat deployments, with one notable exception being the relief of the Commanding Officer for 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.⁶ Also, what is not reflected in the data provided for this paper is the number of officers removed or relieved from staff billets or other positions of responsibility, and the reasons for their being relieved, throughout the USMC. If no additional, concerted effort, focus or training programs were executed by the USMC to develop commanders during this period, then why were so many commanders relieved during this period? This author does not pretend to speak on behalf of the USMC or those officers relieved of command, but it is my opinion that the cause could be within the USMC institutional culture.

George Reed, in his book, *Tarnished, Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, discusses culture as it relates to toxic leaders and his comments can be applied to the USMC. The USMC, like other military services is a results oriented business. Marine Officers are goal driven individuals who pride themselves in accomplishing assigned missions, especially under difficult conditions. The USMC culture rewards those who accomplish tasks under harsh and dangerous conditions, and there is a tendency to accept or glorify leaders who accomplish these missions, even if their leadership style is questionable.⁷ This focus on mission accomplishment and short-term objectives can

negatively impact long-term health and welfare of people in a unit or organization.⁸ Within the USMC, it could be argued that the value of “getting results” becomes the priority, superseding its core values of Honor, Courage and Commitment.⁹ Rewarding commanders and leaders within the USMC for mission accomplishment regardless of how they lead or treat their Marines and Sailors fosters a culture where people are not as important as the mission. As toxic leaders are rewarded with command or other cherished opportunities such as resident professional military education (PME), subordinates see this type of behavior as the path to success. Emulating the behavior of these senior leaders, they themselves become toxic, influencing the next generation’s leadership style development.

The USMC enjoys a reputation of being hard-nosed and no nonsense. Those within the ranks of the USMC celebrate this reputation. Some Marine stereotypes are portrayed as gruff men and woman, focused on the mission-first and personal needs second. They are sometimes portrayed as caring little about anything not part of the USMC mission. While there may be some truth to this image, it does not apply to all Marine leaders. There are many leaders, at all levels, including commanders who strike the balance between inspirational leadership and mission accomplishment. This is the expectation of the USMC. However there are those who create an atmosphere of fear, abusiveness, and incivility.

The USMC must also recognize the effects toxic leadership on subordinates, their willingness to continue serving, and readiness. This intangible cost to the USMC creates stress on the force beyond that experienced by victims of a toxic leader. Toxic and counterproductive behaviors sabotage culture and values, as well as performance,

productivity, force protection, health, readiness, and actions of personnel.¹⁰ Private-sector research has identified relationships between toxic behaviors and adverse effects on mental and physical health (including suicide, stress-related illness, and post-traumatic stress), increasing demands on an already overburdened healthcare system; job satisfaction and commitment; individual and collective performance (cognition and collaboration); employee turnover; and the creation of an organizational culture that tolerates other inappropriate behaviors including sexual harassment and discrimination.¹¹ Research has also identified the transmission of adverse effects to bystanders and family members.¹² Finally, private-sector research also associates toxicity with the monetary costs of medical care, legal representation, personnel replacement and training, lost man-hours due to leaders addressing toxic behavior, complaint investigations, absenteeism, decreased performance of targets and bystanders, avoidance of the toxic person, time spent job searching, and wasted resources.¹³

While research for this paper did not uncover definitive figures showing the direct, monetary cost of the effects of toxic leadership, it is this author's experience that hundreds of man hours are exhausted investigating command climate issues either by an appointed investigating officer, or an Inspector General representative responding to a complaint. Additionally this author personally knows several Marines and Officers who decided to leave active duty based on their experience with a toxic leader at some point in their career. These losses represent millions of dollars invested by the USMC into the training and development, which was taken out of the ranks of the USMC due to the actions of toxic leadership.

Toxic Leadership defined

Toxic leadership is often discussed in both the civilian sector and in the military services. A quick online search of the topic will result in several books and dozens of articles, blogs and discussions about toxic leadership. Each author proposes their own definition, with many similarities common to all. One author states that a “toxic leader” is different from just a poor leader. A poor leader is one who fails his mission or his people. A toxic leader fails at the mission and fails his people. His command fails by both external and internal measures.¹⁴ Analyst Gillian Flynn provides a particularly descriptive definition of a toxic manager; he is the “manager who bullies, threatens, yells. The manager whose mood swings determines the climate of the office on any given workday. Who forces employees to whisper in sympathy in cubicles and hallways? The backbiting, belittling boss from hell. Call it what you want—poor interpersonal skills, unfortunate office practices—but some people, by sheer shameful force of their personalities make working for them rotten.”¹⁵ The United States Army also defines toxic leadership in Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership* as:

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.¹⁶

These definitions, which are drawn from both civilian and military writers and publications, display a small number of the varied characteristics of toxic leadership. Upon review of 30 different websites, articles and books, there are even more traits of

poor leaders that emerge. Toxic leaders can be narcissistic, autocratic, manipulative, intimidating, overly competitive and sometimes discriminatory.¹⁷ They may be ambivalent in their avoidance or deference to decision making, pretensive in an over confidence in their own importance, or a hypocrite espousing standards that they themselves do not meet.¹⁸ Toxic leadership is often times hard to recognize from higher in the chain of command but they are much easier to spot when looking up the organizational pyramid. This creates a challenge for the leaders of an organization to identify and rectify the problem.¹⁹ Toxic personnel are experts in managing upward, simultaneously giving the appearance of high performance to their supervisors while abusing others to get ahead. In other words, they kiss up and kick down.²⁰

With all the published research and writing available on the topic, the USMC does not have its own definition of toxic leadership.²¹ Simply defining toxic leadership would not rectify the problem, however it will give Marine leaders at all levels the ability to identify and correct toxicity in their units. More importantly, if they see those traits in themselves and apply corrective action, their actions will benefit not only their subordinates, but themselves as well. Marine Officers are taught, mentored and developed to be supportive, enthusiastic and influential leaders. They are taught that leadership is not a popularity contest; yet, leadership is fundamentally about people.²² They are constantly told to avoid selfish behavior toward their mission, Marines and Sailors and their units. Marine Corps Tactical Publication 6-10B, Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders states leaders are expected by others to behave ethically and responsibly, both personally and professionally. A leader promotes ethical behavior in his or her subordinates through setting, enforcing, and publicizing high

standards. Furthermore, leaders must project an example of tolerance in regard to honest mistakes in the training environment.²³ It can be argued that the extensive leadership training, coupled with ethical decision making discussions to which USMC Officers are exposed during resident PME schools and informal leadership discussions elsewhere should provide Officers with a basis of the characteristics of a good and bad leader. However, a lack of quantifiable definition creates gaps in the USMC ability to address these problem areas in Officers as they develop.

Without a definition, it is difficult to identify and correct poor leaders as there is no reference for senior Officers to apply to the problem. Additionally, in this author's opinion, discovery or identification of a toxic leader is often in the eye of the beholder. The military censures toxic leadership where it is found, but it can be difficult to recognize such misconduct, unlike more actionable offenses that are easier to identify. What constitutes good or bad leadership often lies open to interpretation.²⁴ Therefore, once a potentially troublesome leader is identified, his senior leadership relies on the most quantitative instrument available to them: the results of command investigations. These investigations, viewed through the lens of a senior leader's own experiences and values may result in administrative or punitive action. In this author's experience, investigations into command climate issues or poor leadership are the result of command climate surveys or complaints through the chain of command, including Inspector General Inquiries conducted after an issue is identified. This process has resulted in the relief of several commanders and senior enlisted advisors. If there was a definition or rubric that leaders across the USMC could utilize when evaluating the

leadership abilities and potential of subordinates, then some of the issues seen throughout the past 17 years may have been avoided.

For the purposes of this paper, I propose the follow definition of toxic leadership originally created by Chaplain (Colonel) Kenneth Williams, United States Army as it encapsulates toxicity in an extremely succinct fashion.

Toxic leadership refers to a pattern of combined, counterproductive behaviors encompassing not only harmful leadership but also abusive supervision, bullying, and workplace incivility, involving leaders, peers, and direct reports as offenders.²⁵

With this proposed definition in mind, assessment and prevention of poor or toxic leadership can be explored. This definition is not all encompassing, but it does provide a baseline for the evaluation of individuals who are exhibiting toxic tendencies. A poor leader may not exhibit all of these characteristics simultaneously, but they will embody at least one of these character traits, or some of the other previously listed behaviors. With an understanding of the proposed definition, and associated traits of toxic leadership, one can observe a Marine's behavior and attitudes, and may gain some insight into what he values. This insight may be the key to influencing the Marine in a positive way, thus modifying any negative behavior he may have displayed.²⁶

Assessing Leaders for Toxicity

With a definition for toxic leadership, how does the Marine Corps now assess leaders for such a subjective trait as toxicity? All people base their opinions on their own experiences and heuristics; ultimately forming their own ideas about the proficiency and competencies about those around them. These opinions are extremely difficult to quantify and hard to utilize to support the appropriate action when it is required. As discussed earlier, assessing the toxicity of an individual is also difficult from the top

down and if superiors are unaware of a problem subordinate, then they do not know to take action.

Marine Corps Order 1610.7, The USMC Performance Evaluation System (PES Manual), which governs to creation and processing of Fitness Reports (FITREP), is the primary tool for evaluating Marine Corps Officers. It provides a Reporting Senior (RS), the first commissioned or warrant officer (or civilian GS-9/equivalent or above) in the reporting chain senior to the Marine Reported On (MRO) a venue to evaluate a Marine on several points including Mission Accomplishment, Individual Character, Leadership, Intellect and Wisdom, and Fulfillment of Evaluation Responsibilities.²⁷ The MRO is the subject of the FITREP.²⁸ The RS evaluates the MRO on each of these sections utilizing a scale of "A," which means unsatisfactory performance and renders the FITREP adverse, to "G," which means distinguished or exceptional performance.²⁹ The RS must determine the position on the scale that best reflects the performance or behavior of the MRO during the evaluation period. Grades are earned by the MRO's displayed efforts and apparent results.³⁰

The two attributes that most closely relate to toxicity are Individual Character and Leadership. In particular, when evaluating an MRO on his Individual Character, RSs are instructed that these attributes distinguish the Marine as an individual and are of the greatest interest to the Marine Corps. Individual Character completes the picture of a "whole Marine."³¹ The Individual Character section focuses on measurable traits of the MRO's individual character such as distinctive mental, physical, moral, and behavioral qualities that each Marine needs by looking at the MRO's courage, effectiveness under stress and initiative.³² These traits are certainly required of Marine Officers, however the

details of each of the attributes do not truly focus on moral or ethical leadership. Moral and behavioral character traits are only mentioned in the preparation instructions.

The Leadership section of the FITREP describes leadership as the primal force that drives all military organizations. The quality of its leadership will determine the overall value of the force.³³ The PES Manual also states that identifying effective leaders is a primary goal of the FITREP. Most leadership styles are obvious at first glance. Others take much longer to become apparent, but are no less effective. The Marine Corps recognizes many leadership styles as effective.³⁴ This section of the FITREP focuses on the most important aspects of leadership. Each evaluated area serves to provide information that gives a more comprehensive picture of the individual's effectiveness as a leader. The overall view provides an understanding of the individual's leadership style.³⁵

Closer examination of the definitions of the attributes within the Individual Character and Leadership sections show that they do not address toxic leadership directly. They outline what is expected of Marine leaders, not what the USMC will not tolerate. Indications of toxicity in a Marine's leadership style are counter to the definitions and should result in those applicable attributes being marked as unsatisfactory, rendering the FITREP adverse. Adverse FITREPs have negative effects on the future of a Marine Officer, severely limiting the Officer's potential for promotion, formal schools and of course, command selection. However, the identification of toxic tendencies does not, in this author's opinion, automatically render that Officer unfit for further service within the USMC. This author believes there is a way to identify and

correct negative behavior without changes the PES Manual and without irreparably damaging an Officer's career.

One way to identify and address toxic leadership is through the use of a 360 evaluations and feedback. This evaluation tool was designed in the civilian sector and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey first championed its application within the Department of Defense.³⁶ Saying he was "disturbed about the misconduct issues (of senior officers and department officials)" General Dempsey said that evaluations of top officers needed to go beyond the traditional assessment of professional performance by superior officers alone. He said that he had decided the changes were necessary "to assess both competence and character in a richer way."³⁷ 360 degree feedback is a method and a tool that provides each employee the opportunity to receive performance feedback from his or her supervisor and four to eight peers, reporting staff members, coworkers, and customers. Most 360 degree feedback tools are also responded to by each individual in a self-assessment.³⁸ This process allows each individual to understand how his effectiveness as an employee, coworker or staff member is viewed by others. The most effective 360 degree feedback processes provide feedback that is based on behaviors that other employees can see.³⁹

In the case of the USMC, a pilot program was recently launched, utilizing a 360 feedback-styled system for General Officers and Colonels at a recent Commandants Combines Commandership Course held at Marine Corps Base Quantico.⁴⁰ All Marine Corps Battalion and above commanders are required to attend this course to receive instruction on the fundamental authorities, responsibilities, programs, and practices that contribute to a successful command tour.⁴¹ This pilot program included a web-based

self-assessment and follow on, web-based questionnaires delivered to three supervisors, five subordinates and five peers.⁴² This pilot program was very similar to the Strategic Leader Assessment offered at the United States Army War College. This pilot program was not completely successful due to a lack of feedback from those who participated and those General Officers and Colonels whose input was requested.⁴³ Even with this unsuccessful pilot program, the practice of 360 feedback evaluations is still a viable option to assess toxic leadership if applied early and throughout an Officer's career especially if it can be tied to certain career milestones and appropriately recorded in a Marine Officers service record.

The success of 360 feedback evaluations depend largely on the MRO's ability to accept the information provided to them, even if it is counter to what they think about themselves. This is best epitomized in the USMC Leadership Principle of "know yourself and seek self-improvement." If an MRO refuses to believe they are toxic, they are less likely to internalize any report casting them in a negative light and will continue acting in a toxic or destructive manner. But, if they recognize their shortfalls and take corrective action, then they can recover and go on to serve effectively for the remainder of their career.

It is this author's opinion that the best times to execute 360 feedback is when an Officer is selected to attend resident PME schools, or when they enroll in the USMC non-resident PME programs. Particularly in the case of resident opportunities, these Officers would have time available to reflect on the results of their feedback, internalizing them and applying them to their personalities and leadership styles without the pressures of being assigned to an operational unit or supporting establishment billet.

This program could be modeled on the pilot program, requiring three supervisors, five subordinates and five peers to provide input to the system, helping to assess the strengths and weakness of the MRO. The results of the survey would be used as a developmental tool, not a punitive counseling. This is especially critical as it could be applied to Officers early in their career, and if punitive, could halt a potentially promising career. Additional application of the results of these feedback mechanisms will be discussed later with respect to their applicability to command selection at the O-5 and O-6 level.

The first application of this system could be at the Captain, or O-3, level when young Officers are selected for Career Level School at the USMC Expeditionary Warfare School or other service equivalent. As a young Captain, or possible First Lieutenant, these Officers have some experience leading Marines and should possess a solid understanding of the USMC FITREP process, having written FITREPs on their own Marines. This would be the first opportunity to receive feedback on their performance from peers and subordinates and could serve as a wakeup call if they are trending negatively.

The next opportunity for 360 feedback could come at the Major, or O-4, level as the Officer is selected to attend Intermediate Level School at the USMC Command and Staff College or other service equivalent. Majors should possess a higher level of self-awareness and have more time leading Marines and a greater number of RS and MROs from which to request feedback.⁴⁴ This would provide the second opportunity for an Officer to receive feedback on their leadership style, which could be compared to

their previous feedback to determine if they are improving, or continuing down a negative path.

The third opportunity for 360 feedback would come when a Lieutenant Colonel is selected for battalion or squadron command. This would provide the MRO some level of additional information about themselves in an effort to prevent toxic tendencies from emerging as they take command. At this point in an Officer's career, they should be capable of absorbing feedback and taking corrective action if required. This opportunity to apply a correction to their personalities could prevent the Officer from finding themselves relieved of command, or worse. An additional opportunity for 360 feedback comes with the Officer's attendance at Senior Service Schools, like the Army War College or the Eisenhower Institute. This would provide the Officers an evaluation of themselves after they successfully complete their O-5 command tour. A final opportunity for 360 feedback would be as the Officer is selected for O-6 level command. Similar to the O-5 command selection feedback, this would provide an additional opportunity to make personal corrections and apply them prior to taking command of a Regiment or Group.

There are difficulties in the application of this program. The MRO could select peers and subordinates who will not submit negative feedback. This skews the data and does not help the Officer or the service in addressing toxic leaders. Conversely, an individual requested to provide feedback may have a personal issue with the MRO, purposely provide negative data when not warranted, although the size of the data could prove their comments to be outliers within the report. Additionally, as a Marine progresses to the rank of Colonel, the pool of senior Officers begins to shrink, and as

seen during the pilot program, the possible lack of feedback from senior Officers potentially negated the results.⁴⁵

These issues could be addressed through proper implementation. In the civilian sector, some 360 evaluations may be administered by outside agencies. A human resource manager or consulting psychologist, for example, requests a list of raters from each participant, then checks with their supervisors to develop a group of raters by mutual agreement. Raters then answer questions through online links. Internet-based online survey systems are popular ways to collect self-report data, but most vendors have developed their own 360-degree feedback administration systems to streamline multi-rater data. Once the data have been tabulated, and the individual understands and accepts it, coaching can begin.⁴⁶ The USMC does not have the resources to utilize outside agencies to execute a comprehensive 360-evaluation program as the cost of such support (with follow on coaching) would be prohibitive.⁴⁷ Within the USMC, an RS could identify potential candidates for feedback based on the Marines and Sailors who report directly to the MRO. The RS could identify peers within the organization to provide feedback as well. The MRO would be required to select their senior evaluators based on those Officers who wrote their FITREPS within a certain number of years. This could alleviate the possibility of an MRO hand selecting subordinates and peers who could provide only positive feedback. With respect to coaching the MRO, once the results are received, it would be incumbent on the MRO to seek out a mentor to review them. Again, this follows the USMC leadership principle of “know yourself and seek self-improvement.” As Officers mature and should be able to accept constructive feedback,

they should be more willing to have an instructor at a resident school, or other mentor go through the results with an objective point of view.

While 360 feedback programs are not a panacea to prevent toxic leaders from being placed in positions of great responsibility, they provide a better mechanism to identify toxicity than the current USMC Performance Evaluation System. A 360-feedback program does place an additional burden on the already overburdened leadership of the Marine Corps but the cost in time to the USMC would be better invested in this type of program, vice having a toxic leader be placed in command of hundreds or thousands of Marines and Sailors.

Prevention of Toxicity and Addressing Toxic Leaders

Prevention of toxic leadership starts with recognizing the problem and its effects, and then adjusting cultural dialogue to make leaders more aware of the signs and indicators of a toxic individual. Currently, USMC Officers receive leadership training at USMC resident PME schools between The Basic School, Expeditionary Warfare School and USMC Command and Staff College.⁴⁸ However, these periods of instruction, as taught at Expeditionary Warfare School for example, are more focused toward what is expected of Marine Corps Officers, without describing toxicity or how to address it within the Officer ranks. Much of this training does focus on ethical leadership and decision making, and Officers at all levels are intended to take these lessons to heart, applying what they learned throughout their career and they are expected to epitomize the ethical and moral leaders they study. However, the number of hours allocated for training is very small in comparison to the course lengths. For example, at Expeditionary Warfare School, Captains receive thirteen hours of formal leadership instruction over the course of an academic year.⁴⁹ These classes focus on Officership as a profession of arms

looking at topics such as ethical decision making, social dynamics of leadership and senior enlisted advisor engagement, not recognizing and addressing destructive leadership.⁵⁰

In order to prevent toxicity from permeating the Officer corps, leadership training throughout should be adjusted to include a definition, indicators and signs of toxicity in leadership and in the workplace. Training alone will not fully root out toxicity in the USMC, it will require the persistent efforts of leaders at all levels to actively seek out and address this issue. This author anticipates that any cultural shift will not take place in the near term and will require years of applied leadership effort to eliminate root causes, if it is even possible. However, there are a multitude of books and articles that discuss almost every facet of the toxic leadership, from identification, to addressing toxicity in the workplace, to how to handle a toxic supervisor when you must work for one.⁵¹ These resources come academia, business journals and other service doctrine. The USMC should be open to all of these when developing new training curricula for students at resident and non-resident programs.

Part of a cultural shift looking to address toxic leadership should also include open and frank discussions about the reliefs of commanders. Discussions about the issues leading up to the relief of commanders, especially if they are related to command climate or misconduct may be difficult, and even embarrassing for the Officers involved. However, these lessons learned would be invaluable to the greater audience of Officers throughout the USMC and would demonstrate senior leadership resolve in driving toxic leadership out of the Officer ranks. As a Commander, learning what not to do may prove more beneficial than mirroring the success of others.

When a toxic leader is identified, senior leaders must address that individual immediately. If the issues are discovered early enough, then remediation can be applied with the desired end state of these character traits being removed from the Officer's leadership style. This is a substantial investment in the development of one leader; however, it has been this author's experience that similar investments are made in junior Marines for other character and performance flaws such as substance abuse, family readiness issues and financial education. When applied correctly, these investments return a more capable and ready warfighter to his unit, or back to American society. A similar investment into correcting toxic behavior will pay great dividends by negating the impact of a leader's toxicity. One method for correcting toxic leadership, or minimizing its impact involves engaged leadership applying the same magnitude of corrective action as they would a Marine with marital or financial problems. Early in their careers, Marine Officers must be provided basic instruction on interpersonal communication and how to give and receive feedback.⁵² They receive plenty of instruction on the basic of leadership and motivation, but the ability to communicate and receive feedback is not included in these lessons. Commanders at all levels must be assessed carefully, and include a more holistic approach. The USMC command selection process is outstanding, and despite some commanders being relieved for climate issues and misconduct, there are hundreds of other commanders who had a successful command tour. It must be noted that not all Officers need to be commanders. Being a Company or Battery Commander as a Captain is a career milestone, but if a candidate for command does not possess the personality, values, integrity and motivation to be a commander, then they should be vectored to other

billets within the command.⁵³ When providing feedback, supervisors and RSs must be able to show how an MRO's performance reflects their personal values. This requires supervisors to exercise another USMC leadership principle: Know your Marines and look out for their welfare. When behavior is measured, people are more conscious of what they do, what others do and what needs to be done, to enhance effectiveness.⁵⁴ Toxic leaders must be closely monitored for any change or regression in their performance or behavior. Once these begin to appear, it must be immediately corrected.⁵⁵ Finally, senior leaders must role model the behavior they expect and it should reflect the values of the institution above all else, reflecting the USMC Leadership principle of Setting the Example. Leaders are always responsible for ensuring that standards are established and understood by those who work for them. If a leader models beneficial and non-toxic behavior, it will permeate through the ranks, increasing productivity and foster a civil workplace.

It can be assumed that some toxic personalities may not be correctable and addressing these Officers and their value to the service is potentially difficult. Once a commander is relieved, these Officers are normally reassigned within a higher headquarters, or issued permanent change of station orders to a new billet elsewhere in the USMC. From this new position, they oftentimes quietly retire from active duty after fulfilling any service obligation. Early identification of toxic leaders, and the application of the suggested corrective actions may or may not be entirely successful. A toxic individual must want to improve. Ultimately, the challenge for toxic leaders who want to reform is to regain the trust of their teams (in this case, the Marines with whom they serve). This is difficult, but it's possible if the leader can demonstrate competence,

integrity and compassion in every interaction with every team member.⁵⁶ However, if they do not feel they need to reform then they will not.

George Reed lectures on toxic leadership and proposes the institution of the “no A#@hole Rule.”⁵⁷ Simply stated, if you are a toxic leader, then you are not needed in an organization. Regardless of the toxic individual's performance or results, if they are an a#@hole, then they are of no value to organization and should be dismissed. This author disagrees with this premise. Dismissing an employee in the civilian sector is far easier than discharging an Officer in the military. A young Officer may be guided to exiting the service after his initial commitment, but more senior Officers, especially at the rank of Major and above are eligible to remain on active duty until retirement. Dismissing an Officer from the USMC is a long a tedious process, and rightfully so. Investigations are required, a Board of Inquiry is convened to determine the Officers value to the service and General Officers are involved in the final decision. Similar to the example of a young Marine with a substance abuse or marital problem, the USMC owns that Marine and still does want what's best for that Marine in the long run.⁵⁸ If an Officer is close to retirement, they may be retained until they retire instead of forcing them out of the service prior receiving their retirement benefits. Additionally, the Officer may still have value to the service in another capacity. This is where this author disagrees with George Reed's “no A#@hole Rule.” Personality traits exhibited by a toxic leader are not beneficial to any work place, however they are especially damaging if that leader is a commander. But, not every Officer needs to be a commander, and if detected early on in their career, the USMC can prevent his selection for command if they exhibit a sustained history of toxic behavior. A toxic individual placed on a staff, or planning team

may bring their expertise in their occupational field to the discussion and have a smaller impact to the force than they would as a commander while allowing the service to capitalize on its investment in training the Officer in question. Additionally, in the more stratified and leadership heavy structure of a staff, a toxic leader could have more direct supervision and peer input into their behavior that could potentially limit the impact of any existing toxicity.

In order to identify toxic leaders earlier in their career and prevent their assignment to command billets, 360 evaluation data could be included as a permanent part of an Officer's Officer Qualification Record (OQR), similar to FITREPs being stored for review by promotion and command selection boards, but 360 evaluations should not be included in promotion board materials as these boards are governed by Title X, U.S. Code.⁵⁹ However since command selection and other boards are executed by the service, 360 evaluation data could be referenced during the proceedings. As an Officer executes their 360 evaluations as previously described, these results would be placed in their OQR, providing board members the opportunity to consider the results as they look to select Officers for command or other opportunities.

Toxic leadership has no place in the USMC Officer population. Officers are entrusted with the sons and daughters of our country. These young men and women join the service for a myriad of reasons, but they do not join to be bullied, harassed, or led by Officers who lack morals or who act in their own self-interest. This paper provided a definition for the USMC to utilize in its discussions pertaining to toxic leadership. The idea of early identification of toxicity in USMC leaders and providing tools they need to correct themselves would greatly decrease the need to take severe actions later in an

Officers career, such as relieving an Officer of command. Adjusting leadership development instruction at USMC resident schools and developing the ability of leaders to utilize better interpersonal skills can also minimize these behaviors. If 360 evaluations and the feedback provided are taken on board by individuals, then toxic tendencies can be mitigated, allowing the Officer to seek self-improvement, facilitating a successful career. The USMC is continually focused on winning the national's battles, priding itself on being the most ready when the nation is least ready. It spends an exorbitant amount of resources, notably time and money, to correct other problems in the lives of Marines. A similar investment in the leadership development of Officers, preventing them from becoming toxic leaders would pay larger dividends for the success of the USMC, both at home and aboard.

Endnotes

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