How to NOT BE a Toxic Leader

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I'd like to start this investigation in Toxic Leadership by taking a good look at ourselves. While it is easy to suggest others are toxic, might we be too?

The Dark Triad

Psychopathy is a component of the Dark Triad of Personality: Psychopathy, Narcissism, and Machiavellianism.

Dark Triad Link: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/dark-triad

We are all on the spectrum. Whereas very few of us will exhibit the cold-hearted aggression of the psychopath, the grandiose self-love of the narcissist, or the ruthless ambition of the Machiavellian, we are all capable of approximations of such behaviors.

Let's look at the psychopath in more detail to explain.

- Psychopaths are uncaring, lack the social emotions of shame, guilt, and embarrassment, and are irresponsible, insincere, overconfident, and selfish.
- They have a "very low tolerance to frustration and a low threshold for discharge of aggression, including violence."
- They are also very short-term orientated, with an inability to plan for the future, and struggle to alter their activity or modulate their responses to account for relevant peripheral information that appears after a task has begun.

Link to Narcissism description: https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/narcissism

Link to Machiavellian description: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/machiavellians-gulling-the-rubes/201509/meet-the-machiavellians

I don't think for a second that you are a psychopath. But have you ever exhibited any psychopathic behaviors?

- Have you ever imposed your will upon somebody less powerful just because the job had to be done, caring not at all for the feelings of the people doing it?
- Have you ever hidden your feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment with aggressive bluster, shielding your vulnerability by deliberately deflecting attention onto others?
- Have you ever done anything irresponsible, like drive too fast to get to a meeting on time or agree to deliver targets that you knew would stress your team?
- Have you ever sucked up to somebody in a more powerful position than you despite thinking they are wrong because not doing so risks your failing to achieve your ambitions?
- Have you over-confidently declared yourself capable of doing a task to get kudos even though you knew you probably weren't?
- Have you ever selfishly ignored the needs of significant others to get your to work done on time in order to progress your career goals?
- Have you ever acted angrily and aggressively because of frustration and irritation at the seeming ineptitude of others?
- Have you ever pushed somebody to make aggressive short-term goals without worrying whether there was any longer-term strategic point to them?

Worryingly, the higher you climb the corporate ladder, the more extreme these tendencies appear to be.

A 2016 Australian-American research project has suggested that up to "one in five [corporate leaders were] found to have clinically elevated levels of psychopathy" - a similar ratio to prison populations. Have we really developed a system of work that rewards toxic behavior to the extent that those who test high in psychopathology thrive?

The cynical among us might note that many psychopathic qualities seem to fit the qualities needed in a senior executive.

- Uncaring for those other than shareholders - check.
- Lacking guilt when laying off workers during cost-cutting - check.
- Uncritical overconfidence about the company's performance - check.
- Short-term orientated and focused on monthly targets - check
- Top-down focused and unwilling to change direction when emergent bottom-up data presents itself - check.

Scary, isn't it?

Defending the Moral Self

How do we preserve a sense of moral selfhood if we all have some tendencies in this direction?

I doubt there is anybody around who hasn't at least done one of the above things at least once. We all have some pathologies we carry with us each day. To avoid displaying them at all times takes incredible displays of willpower and reflective practice.

You might want to place yourself on the toxic spectrum - from 0% (never partaking in any toxic activities) to 100% (full-blown psychopathology).

Most of us are not psychopaths. We are normal adult humans just being a little bit toxic at certain times while being very non-toxic at other times. How do we rationalise our toxic behaviors and maintain our positive self-concept?

- We use the hero narrative. This is the way we frame ourselves in conversation. When discussing life and work, we are always the hero of our own narratives. All of us are the clever fixers who navigate our way through the complexities of life and solve things that the idiots around us can't see and have caused.
- We don't tell tales of us being the fool that caused the problem. Or the Machiavellian who stabbed someone in the back while solving it.Or the psychopath who caused the serious mental anguish to somebody in our selfish execution of the task. We're always the hero (and often, simultaneously, the victim).
- In the hero-narrative, the successful completion of our mini-quest rationalizes the actions taken to achieve it. We might have stomped all over countless lives and made very many people miserable during this quest, but it doesn't matter because we sorted everything out. Fixed some foolishness and made the world a better place. The toxicity we displayed during the pursuit of the goal gets dissolved in the glory of the successful acquisition of the goal.

This is how we rationalize being toxic. It is something always worth reflecting on.

The Steve Jobs Example

But what of Steve Jobs, I hear you ask. He had the reputation for being so toxic that Apple included in their historical records the time he stole money from his co-founder Steve Wozniak by lying to him about the reward being offered for a task.

Surely that shows that being toxic isn't bad. In fact, it seems to be a successful strategy. Why shouldn't I develop such a strategy?

That misses the point and is a very, very narrow reading of Jobs - a problem I have seen time and time again in the technology and startups worlds.

Ron Warren, a clinical psychologist, whose Leadership 360 tool is employed at Yale in the development of future leaders, uses the Jobs - Wozniak relationship to frame the derailment of leadership. Wozniak balanced Jobs - the affable omega to Jobs' toxic alpha. Once Wozniak withdrew from Apple, Jobs became so marginalized, he quit.

In *Personality at Work: The Drivers and Derailers of Leadership*, Warren argues that this perfect equilibrium helped Apple's early rise, and was behind Jobs' initial fall. Sadly, such a high-quality, perfectly balanced relationship is a rarity. In general, leaders go it alone.

To explain, Warren doesn't use the Big Five model, but a 13-point system he calls LMAP.

For Warren, Jobs was positioned in the dominance sector. He strongly displayed:

- Rigidity
- Hostility
- Need to Control
- Competitiveness

In contrast, Wozniak was equally strongly positioned in the Social Intelligence and Teamwork sector, being open to feedback, helpful and sociable. When Wozniak was at Apple, there was equilibrium.

Jobs' dominance traits were complemented by another set of traits that drove performance:

- Innovation
- Achievement Drive
- Conscientiousness

However, despite excelling in all these areas, Jobs was so toxic nobody could work with him. Once Wozniak withdrew from Apple, there was nobody to balance them out, resulting in Jobs' marginalization and eventual exit. It took his public humiliation and subsequent experiences with NeXT, Pixar, and his battles with cancer to blunt these edges.

The Outputs of Toxicity

Let's look at what Jobs' toxic behaviors might have been causing in the absence of Wozniak and prior to his self-development and NeXt and Pixar. Firstly, he might have been completely unaware of how toxic he was being. Furthering the idea of the hero-narrative, Warren explains how very few people have any self-awareness when it comes to their own toxicity, writing:

> *A web search of the term brutal boss yielded 44 million hits. Much of the research focuses on how the behaviors generated by these personalities create toxic work environments. Because leaders set the behavioral norms for a culture, their behaviors have a contagious quality. Bullying begets bullying, down the line. Although almost every organization promotes treating others with respect and consideration as a core value, the research shows that hostile, abusive workplace behavior is common throughout the Westernized world. In a 2007 Zogby national*

survey of 8,000 Americans, 37 percent reported being bullied by others, and yet only 0.05 percent self-reported behaving like a bully. This reveals that the vast majority of bullies are oblivious to the toxic impact of their behavior on others.

Through numerous examples, he illustrates how much of a problem this can be.

1: Many of today's leaders have come to equate leadership with toxicity

Some people build toxicity into the characterization of good leadership. David Campbell, a senior fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership, reported that "We've had managers come to our center who actually *defined leadership as the ability to inflict pain*."

This can be deep protection of the moral self. I am not toxic, but I must behave in a toxic manner because of the role I inhabit, or the organization will be less likely to achieve its goals. The more noble the organization's cause, the more justification there is for acting out the necessary levels of toxicity to get things done.

There are two things to worry about here.

Firstly, with so many companies reaching for a noble cause or purpose, will the justification of leadership toxicity become more commonplace?

Secondly, there is the classic Erving Goffman quote from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Choose your self-presentations carefully, for what starts out as a mask may become your face.

2: The number of us that experience or have experienced toxicity at work

Warren notes that Harvey Hornstein, a psychology professor at Columbia University, in a survey of 1,000 people, found that 90 percent claimed that they had worked for a "brutal boss" who publicly humiliated them or blamed them for his or her own failures at some point in their career. He further estimates that at least 20 percent of employees currently report to a manager who is a brutal boss.

Worryingly, this might be a low estimation.

Loraleigh Keashly, Joel Neuman, and Karen Jagatic's research on workplace and school bullying shows that 25 to 35 percent of U.S. employees report being bullied, abused, and mistreated in the workplace.

There is no gender bias.

People have a tendency to bully others of the same gender. Men are more likely to be bullied by men (62 percent), and women are more likely to be bullied by women (63 percent).

3: Wellness. Those who bully don't only hurt others, they hurt themselves too

The 1950s type A personality studies by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman initially linked an individual's driven, impatient, competitive, aggressive behaviors to cardiovascular disease and increased mortality.

Updated research in 2001, by Redford Williams at Duke University (and others), shows that, in fact, only hostile and irritable behaviors are tied to higher mortality.

More recently, Jeffrey Pfeffer's *Dying for a Paycheck* has illustrated just how much widespread workplace stress, partially caused by ongoing toxicity, is causing US workers to die before their time.

Unlike the above research, Pfeffer focuses on employees experiencing the toxic behaviors of leaders,

illustrating that "men and women in the lower ranks had about a 50 percent higher probability of reporting chest pain and angina and men had more than twice the likelihood of having physician-diagnosed narrowing of the arteries than those of higher ranks."

Not only is this tragic for their families, but it has a significant organizational and social cost. Arguing that toxic work environments might be the cause of 120,000 unnecessary deaths per year in the US, Pfeffer calls workplaces "the fifth leading cause of death", stating that they "account for about [US]$180 billion in additional healthcare expenses, approximately 8 percent of the total healthcare spending."

4: The negative impact on organizational performance

Hostile leaders not only negatively impact those who work for and with them; they hurt their organizations. Hostile behaviors impact not only the target of abuse but also the observers, which raises stress and turnover and lowers engagement and the willingness of employees to put forth discretionary efforts.

Warren illustrates this with a real-life clinical example.

Jim was a Hostile Left-Side leader—a screamer who invariably blamed others when he didn't get what he wanted when he wanted. His initial reaction to the feedback report was no different: "I wouldn't have to yell and scream if they did things right the first time. But they didn't learn, they don't listen, so I yell." I pointed out that when he yelled and screamed at others, he was creating exactly the wrong conditions for learning. His raised voice and threatening emotional style automatically activated other team members' sympathetic nervous systems. Now they were adrenalized and in fight-or-flight mode—a biological mode effective for fighting or fleeing, but not for learning. So if his goal was to simply vent and express his irritation, his method was fine. But if his goal was to coach the people on his team to help them learn and to improve operations, his emotional style simply would not work. He was very quiet as he pondered this, and then he said, "I've never thought about it that way before."

Over time, this continuous fight or flight existence will have a significant impact on cognitive ability and psychological health. In knowledge work requiring high-level thinking and collaborative sensemaking, this will have huge performance implications.

Fixing Toxic Leadership

I opened this piece with a section on Dark Triad personalities. Before looking at Warren's suggestions towards fixing toxic leadership, there is an important point to be made.

Framing a collection of toxic or self-interested behaviors as personality disorders introduces a couple of complexities:

1. Once people learn about these "disorders", they see them everywhere. This is a problem when only 1% of the population tests in these abnormal ranges
2. Recent research has suggested there is no such thing as a personality disorder, only traumas that if unaddressed cause the person to behave in pathological manners

If your boss is displaying toxic traits that seem to fall into the Dark Triad, that does not necessarily mean he or she is unfixable. Only a very few people will actually be clinically psychopathic.

While it is, of course, possible you have been unlucky enough to work for a psychopath (in which case, run), the greater likelihood is that you've ended up working for somebody with high dominance traits that have never been tempered. This is where Warren's work is so valuable.

We now come to the promotional paradox and the reason so many at the top echelons of the organization display such tendencies.

Warren argues that emerging leaders display a Herculean work ethic, assertiveness, and confident personality (assertiveness and confidence have long been seen as key leadership traits, as is hard work, which suggests conscientiousness). These traits help them get fast-tracked to the top of the organizational chart.

But if dominance goes unchecked during their rise, its tendency towards toxicity can become more prominent and problematic over time. Warren provides a snapshot of such a leader.

These leaders are impatient and emotionally labile, hypercritical of others, inflexible, and dogmatic—often refusing to seriously engage around alternative points of view. They love to debate, argue and contest others. Yet they are quick to become defensive and interpret being questioned as a personal attack on their intelligence, knowledge, or integrity. They hold steadfast to opinions and beliefs and are vulnerable to confirmation biases in selectively seeking and interpreting information that confirms their preexisting ideas—all too often, they are strong but wrong.

As a consequence, many such leaders fail to develop any meaningful social relationships in the workplace.

For example, in a 1997 study of 511 company leaders, Linda Grant and Richard Hagberg found that 70 percent of leaders are "loners," dangerously insulated from other team members.

1. While intellectually and technically skilled, they were also self-absorbed, impatient, impulsive, manipulative, dominating, and critical of others.
2. They lacked insight into their strengths and weaknesses.
3. They were abusive to others in the workplace.

To solve the challenges of domineering leadership, Warren suggests leaders should work on developing high quality connections within the company.

1. Takes steps to prevent isolation and independence - i.e. become more socially-connected and interdependent
2. Develop teamwork skills
3. Communicate with more care and consideration - to reframe blunt and direct language and consciously attempt to empathise and engage with others
4. Commit to a conscious effort to focus more on the interests and ideas of others.

The Future of Leadership - Better Selection. Better Connection

Drawing from Ron's insights, I'd like to close by noting how much important work is now being done on the prevention of domineering people being identified as high-potential future-leaders and in the development of high quality connections.

Selection: Learning Agility

The Learning Agility framework is used to identify people with leadership potential. It has five components:

1. Mental Agility
2. Results Agility
3. People Agility
4. Change Agility
5. Self Agility

Mental Agility attempts to capture somebody's General Mental Ability, which has long been associated with high performance and leadership potential.

Results Agility attempts to capture, in Warren's framework, somebody's Grit and Task Mastery - the likelihood they will strive to achieve in all circumstances.

Most organizations stop there when it comes to identifying high potentials. This will leave many of the highest potentials flying underneath the radar.

People Agility attempts to capture Warren's Social Intelligence and Teamwork sector - how well they can manage their interpersonal relationships. It counters a worrying trend in organizations using lower-end psychometrics of employing people possessing similar traits in the belief that these similarities, in themselves, will engender good cultures and teamwork.

Change Agility captures the degree to which people can change their tactics if the world unfolding in front of them is different from the one they expected, and the degree to which they can cope with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

Self Agility is self-awareness and flexibility - the ability to understand your own emotions and actions, and temper or changes them into more appropriate forms.

Taking all five into account will prevent an organization from selecting people who run the risk of becoming toxic and domineering once they rise up the leadership ladder.

Connection: Developing High-Quality Working Relationships

In *Social Physics* and other writings, Sandy Pentland, the Director of MIT Connection Science, has illustrated how regular meaningful social connections drive performance and increase the likelihood of innovative solutions. Such connections, or the lack thereof, are also the biggest predictor of the poor emotional wellbeing we have. Without them, organizational performance goes down AND your employees will become ill.

This is a big problem in a COVID-impacted world.

Research has begun to focus on how we can develop high-quality connections at work to drive such performance. I'm already looking forward to Becky Andree's Ph.D. on the subject. Rather than explain in detail, I'll leave you with Becky's summary of the current research. I think it might well be the next big thing.

High Quality Connections

Subjective Experience

How HQCs are experienced.

Sense of Vitality – energized in connection.

Positive Regard – Feeling known and loved or being respected and cared for.

Mutuality – potential movement in the connection, mutual vulnerability and responsiveness as individuals experience the full participation and engagement.

Structural Features

What is present in an HQCs.

Emotional Carrying Capacity – expression of more emotion, both positive and negative.

Tensility – connections' ability to bend and withstand strain and to function in a variety of circumstances.

Connectivity – level of openness to new ideas and influences.

Basic social-psychological pathways to build and strengthen HQCs

Cognitive

Cognitions can predispose people to be more or less open to connecting with others at work.

Other-awareness – being aware of another person's presence and behaviors. Capacity to distinguish between behavior, cognitions, and emotions of the self and of others.

Impressions of Others –Quick impressions we form about others can shape how connections develop.

Perspective-taking – imagining ourselves in another person's shoes. Not just about recognizing someone else as separate, but in mentally representing the other's experience as our own.

Emotional

How emotions coordinate the mind, body, and feelings, orienting individuals toward others.

Emotional Contagion – how a person or group unwittingly or explicitly influence the emotions and attitudes of others.

Empathy – when we experience another's emotions. When we acknowledge the fact and feeling of what another person is experiencing.

Behavioral

What we do and how we do it at work is important for changing possibilities for and means of connecting.

Respectful Engagement – how we show esteem, dignity, and care for another person.

Task Enabling –Interpersonal actions that help someone compete or perform a task.

Play – direct expression of human community. Enabling learning and risk taking.

"High-Quality Connections" by John Paul Stephens, Emily Heaphy, and Jane E. Dutton in Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship

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The post "How to NOT BE a Toxic Leader" *was first published by Dr. Richard Claydon here* https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-toxic-leader-dr-richard-claydon/"

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https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/how-to-not-be-a-toxic-leader