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HEALING FROM WITHIN:
LEARNING FROM THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED WITH TOXIC CHAPLAIN
CORPS LEADERS

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

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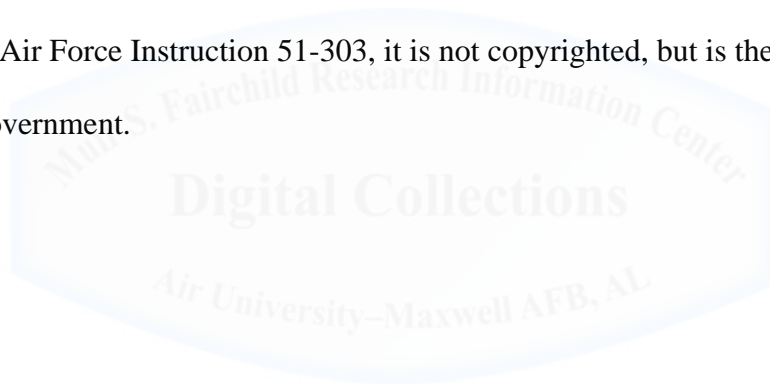


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PREFACE

This paper has been over a year in the making. While I was trying to figure out a practical research project that has the potential to help others, a fellow colleague sent me a flier with Dr. George Reed's name which advertised a conference about toxic leadership. It sparked an immediate interest. I contacted Dr. Reed, who gave me encouragement along with a few chaplain colleagues who have suffered under toxic leaders. I believe that the issue of toxic leadership is one that has touched many lives both inside and outside of the military. To be able to contribute to research that could benefit someone subject to that situation is indeed humbling to me.

I would like to thank Dr. Reed for his initial consultation and for his guidance and encouragement as I have conducted my research paper. I would also like to thank my advisors for my research proposal development and research paper as well as my classmates which have given me feedback and encouragement.

I would also like to thank the Air Force Chaplain Corps. I am appreciative of the mission we have in serving others. I am grateful to my supervisors and co-workers who have given me mentorship, direction, opportunities, and freedom. I can say I do not feel like I have had a toxic leader. I am also very thankful to the chaplains and chaplain assistants who voluntarily participated in this research project. Without you, I would not have been able to address this issue and potential for helping others. Thank you for entrusting me to share your story and I pray that it will help others who face similar distressing situations.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not include my wife and child in my thankfulness. I have spent many nights completing homework but have always tried to make time for you. Sometimes I did well and others not so good. Thank you for your support.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to research the question of what can be learned from Air Force Chaplain Corps personnel who have been subordinate to toxic leaders. This paper make use of the comparative case study methodology through the exploratory case study method utilizing lessons learned from Air Force Chaplain Corps members who have been subordinate to toxic leadership. This was accomplished by interviewing 19 Chaplain Corps personnel who volunteered and who have had these experiences. Additionally all the participants received the same 12 questions with three broad categories of dynamics of the toxic leader, of how the team was affected and coped, and how the individual was affected and managed stresses during and after the experience.

This study gives additional insight into toxic leader characteristics based on the experiences of those who have been subordinate to the toxic leader. These experiences include showing an inflated sense of self and narcissism, the lack of concern or acknowledgement of those they supervise, and the lack of self-awareness. Additionally this research shows that teams have a variety of response from not being a cohesive team, to finding a point in which they were starting to cope together after a period of not functioning well, or being an interconnected team despite the toxic leadership. Finally, this research shows how some Chaplain Corps personnel were not able to cope being subordinate to toxic leaders, while others had a point in which they began to manage the stressful environment, and others employed different healthy strategies in how they dealt with a toxic leader. Nonetheless some have been able to recover and apply lessons learned from such an experience while others are still in the process of healing.

Section 1: Introduction

While there is not one universal description of a toxic leader, one working definition offered by George Reed, PhD defines it as someone who has “an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates, a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate, and a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest.”¹

Toxic leadership is a problem in many organizations and the Air Force Chaplain Corps also faces this quandary. Unfortunately, there has not been a study to show the scope of toxic leadership in the Air Force, much less in the Chaplain Corps. The Army, however, released a study stating that 80 percent of officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) that were surveyed experienced toxic leadership.² In researching what can be learned from those who have experienced being subordinate to toxic leaders in the Air Force, at least a few chaplains and chaplain assistants who have stepped forward to offer their experience suggesting this would be a worthwhile subject to explore.

Chaplain Major Matthew Boyd highlighted the existence of leadership failures within the Chaplain Corps when he quoted a 2015 Survey and an interview he had with a senior leader. He wrote, “The survey also indicates that there is a prevalent perception that unhealthy leadership within the Chaplain Corps is tolerated and poor leaders are not held accountable for leadership failures. Furthermore, there is a shared opinion that there are far too many leadership failures.”³ While Boyd’s study does not provide a context of how the leadership failures are unhealthy, there is little doubt in speaking to some Chaplain Corps personnel that toxic leadership is a contributing factor.

There are substantial amounts of research that addresses how to identify or prevent toxic leadership, different discussions on whether a toxic leader can be rehabilitated, the effects of toxicity on followers or teams, but very little on how one can cope in this type of environment. Vicki Webster and fellow co-authors present a case that there are considerable amounts of literature describing coping mechanisms for a variety of workplace stressors but very little on the specific to the stressor of toxic leadership behavior.⁴

This paper will research the question of what can be learned from Air Force Chaplain Corps personnel who have been subordinate to toxic leaders. Studying the experiences of Chaplain Corps personnel who have been subordinate to toxic leaders will help further understanding of toxic leadership, provide thoughts in regards of team dynamics, and offer insight into individual experiences and resilience. This is not a research to vilify the Chaplain Corps as all organizations have the potential of toxic leadership. In 2009 one civilian study had 94 percent of respondents responding that they had worked with a toxic leader at some time in their career.⁵ Another researcher found that there was very little difference in comparing toxic leadership in the civilian sector with the military.⁶

There is much to be learned from studying the lived experience of those who have endured these situations. There could be much we can learn from those who were resilient in the face of toxic leadership. By studying the accounts of those who have experienced toxic leadership, additional insight into perspectives of the experiences of those who have been subordinate to the toxic leader will be gained. These experiences will include showing an inflated sense of self and narcissism, the lack of concern or acknowledgement of those they supervise, and the lack of self-awareness.

Additionally by learning from their experiences, a better understanding of how teams

succeed or fail in this environment could emerge. This research will show that teams have a variety of responses from not being a cohesive team, to finding a point in which they were starting to cope together after a period of not functioning well, or being an interconnected team despite the toxic leadership.

Finally, because the Chaplain Corps promotes resiliency in life's demanding situations, Chaplain Corps personnel have the potential in demonstrating competent coping and recovery skills for others who may experience a toxic leader. Some Chaplain Corps personnel were not able to cope effectively while being subordinate to toxic leaders, while others had a point in which they began to manage the stressful environment, and yet others employed different healthy strategies in how they dealt with a toxic leader. Additionally some have been able to recover and apply lessons learned from such an experience while others are still in the process of healing.

This paper will make use of the comparative case study methodology through the exploratory case study method to see what lessons could be learned from AF Chaplain Corps members who have been subordinate to toxic leadership. This was accomplished by interviewing 19 Air Force Chaplain Corps personnel who have been subordinate to toxic leaders and identifying any narrative themes that emerge. The participants volunteered to be interviewed and are not a representative sample of the Air Force Chaplain Corps. As the interviews were conducted, the interviewer confirmed that all of the participants had shared the same understanding of what constitutes a "toxic leader" and all the participants received the same 12 questions in three broad categories: dynamics of the toxic leader, of how the team was affected and coped, and how the individual was affected and managed stresses during and after the experience. Further discussion of the research methodology and participants can be seen in Section Three and Appendix A.

The primary objective of this research was to see if there are any themes that emerge, especially regarding attributes of toxic leaders and resiliency tactics that could be gleaned from those subordinates. The aim of the research is to assist in augmenting appropriate counseling for those who have experienced or are experiencing toxic leadership, as well as open doors for further investigation on resiliency of members serving in a toxic leadership environment. The secondary aim is to identify factors that could lead to greater resilience of a subordinate who has been subject to a toxic leader. The real-life applications could add to helpful counseling thoughts for those facing similar circumstances or lead to further research.

This research paper contains a literature review to define toxic leadership, its traits, and its effect in the workplace. It will also define resiliency and the Comprehensive Airmen Fitness (CAF) model. In the next section, there will be a discussion of the interview method employed and background data of contributors. The section that follows will discuss the results of the interviews by breaking the interview answers into three categories of toxic leader dynamics, team affects and coping, and personal affects and coping. Recommendations and a summary conclusion will be provided.

Section 2: Background/Literature Review

Most research on toxic leadership focuses on definitions of the phenomenon and effects on organizations. Research on resiliency seeks to understand how individuals recover after everyday life trauma or in some instances in the face of extensive trauma such as post traumatic stress events.

Toxic Leadership Description

Poor leadership has been experienced by many personnel through the ages. However in the past 20 years, there has been a growing interest in describing toxic leaders as well as the

effect of that toxicity on teams. Dr. Reed believes that there are two categories of thought related to toxic leadership. The first tries to define toxic leadership through specific behaviors such as bullying while the second focuses on the impact on the organization.⁷ Understanding other explanations of toxic leadership helps to show the different thoughts and similarities in this field of study.

Jean Lipman-Blumen was one of the early researchers into toxic leadership, and her definition is pertinent. She is often cited as a primary source from her book *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians and How We Can Survive Them*. In it she writes, “We shall use ‘toxic leaders’ as a global label for leaders who engage in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibit certain dysfunctional personal characteristics. To count as toxic, these behaviors and qualities of character must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations. The intent to harm others or to enhance the self at the expense of others distinguishes seriously toxic leaders from the careless or unintentional toxic leaders, who also cause negative effects.”⁸

However, not everyone agrees on the same definition of toxic leadership. In his book *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military*, George Reed states: “There is no consensus definition among scholars who study toxic leadership, just as there is no universally accepted definition of leadership. It is an emerging term in an emerging field of study. Toxic leadership is closely related to other concepts such as abusive supervision, petty tyranny, workplace victimization, bullying, workplace psychopathy, brutal bosses, intolerable bosses, harassers, incivility, derailed leaders, and destructive leadership, so those interested in these phenomena should include such keywords in their search for references.”⁹

There can also be a debate about whether toxic leaders are truly “leaders” or if they can

never be more than managers. When it comes to this area of research, the terms are often used interchangeably, not to describe the effectiveness of an authority figure, but to describe the negative impact on the workplace environment. The main focus of the descriptions is the characteristics of the individuals in authority as well as the level of toxicity produced. To highlight the difference, Lipman-Blumen stated in an interview that one cannot be a leader without integrity but could be a toxic leader.¹⁰

Toxic Leadership Traits

As there are many definitions of toxic leaders, there are also different descriptions which inventory toxic leadership behaviors and traits that compromise toxic leadership. Despite the varying descriptions there appears to be some emerging consensus.

Lipman-Blumen gives one such list of what toxic leaders are like by stating, “There are numerous dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics that feed toxic leadership. For example, some leaders earn their toxic stripes through their cynicism, greed, corruptibility, moral blind spots, and stupidity. Narcissism, paranoia, grandiosity, and megalomania drive still other toxic leaders. Then, there are leaders whom we recognize as toxic because their actions spring from malevolence, even evil intent. Still other leaders may be toxic through sheer cowardice.”¹¹

Her list includes:

- “Lack of integrity that marks the leader as cynical, corrupt, hypocritical, or untrustworthy;
- Insatiable ambition that prompts leaders to put their own sustained power, glory, and fortunes above their followers' well-being;
- Enormous egos that blind leaders to the shortcomings of their own character and thus limit their capacity for self- renewal;

- Arrogance that prevents acknowledging their mistakes and, instead, leads to blaming others;
- A morality that makes it nigh impossible for them to discern right from wrong;
- Avarice that drives leaders to put money and what money can buy at the top of the list;
- Reckless disregard for the costs of their actions to others as well as to themselves;
- Cowardice that leads them to shrink from the difficult choices;
- Failure both to understand the nature of relevant problems and to act competently and effectively in leadership situations.”¹²

Whereas the Air Force leadership doctrine does not address toxic leadership, the Army is the first branch of service to take time to deal with this destructive issue. In their leadership doctrine, “Some leaders use inappropriate strategies to obtain immediate results and mindless adherence to orders without concern for others. They may bully others, berate subordinates mercilessly, or make unlawful choices to get their way. Selfish leaders ignore ideas from others, micromanage events, hoard information, undermine peers, and work to look good to superiors. Extreme and consistent forms of these undesirable behaviors indicate a toxic or abusive leader.”¹³

Toxic Leadership Effects on the Workforce

Additional research shows how destructive toxic leadership can be to an organization. Because of the destructive tendencies of a toxic leader, there can be devastating effects on the workforce. The toxic leader pollutes the culture of the organization which they work which has huge implications on the work environment.

While there are varied descriptive words, many agree on the sediment of lower morale and negative impact on the mission. Gillian Flynn wrote descriptively about a “manager whose mood swings determine the climate of the office on any given workday...who forces employees

to whisper in sympathy in cubicles and hallways.”¹⁴ Lt Col Doty and MSgt Fenlason identify the narcissistic attitude of a toxic leader devastates “esprit de corps, discipline, drive, and willing service of subordinates and units they comprise.”¹⁵

The effects of toxic leadership are not necessarily limited to the workplace but can affect individual lives and marriages as well. In a limited study, Judith Black found that “the effects of toxic leadership flow into the marriage and home life of those who experience it.”¹⁶ In another study on the aspect of coping while working for a toxic leader by Vicky Webster, the impact on individual well being included a loss of self-confidence or self-doubt, feeling highly stressed, anxious, depressed, mistrust, anger, fear, and health problems such as hair loss, colds, insomnia, rashes, weight loss or gain, headaches, and digestive problems.¹⁷ The Army also conducted a study which implied that toxic leadership had a factor in pushing eight soldiers over the edge in committing suicide.¹⁸

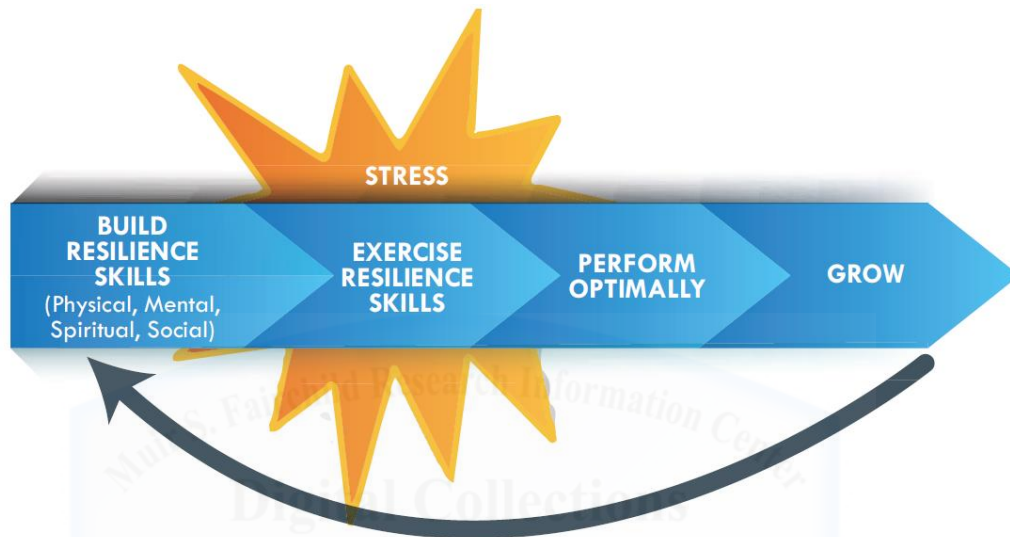
Resiliency Definition

Since resiliency has become a promoted topic for individual and community well-being, there have been many different definitions and descriptions of what it looks like. One common thought is that resiliency is the ability to bounce back from life’s situations. Robert Wicks, PsyD defined resiliency as “the ability to meet, learn from, and not be crushed by the challenges and stresses of life.”¹⁹ Similarly, Edith Hendersen Grotenberg states that “resilience is the human capacity to deal with, overcome, learn from, or even be transformed by the inevitable adversaries of life.”²⁰

The Air Force addresses resilience as “the ability to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands.”²¹ Recently the Chief of Chaplains briefed a group of officers on spiritual resilience and the need to learn and grow in resilient factors “left of the

bang” (See Figure 1) in order to maximize performance, growth, and recovery “right of the bang.” The bang was any stress that would happen in one’s life. It could be something as a simple stress of a PT test, to something much more personal such as a divorce, or even in the professional arena such as enduring a toxic leader.²²

Figure 1: Illustration to display building resilient skills before the bang (stress) to perform optimally following the stressor.²³



Resiliency has the potential to help an individual or group endure during the reign of a toxic leader as well as help find meaning, purpose, and growth after one has experienced such a time. There certainly can be growth from such an experience. Col Ramona Fiorey writes of one such growth potential. She asserted, “Many who have experienced ‘toxic’ leaders understand the importance of self-awareness, empathy, and desire to develop the unit environments that produce team cohesion and resilience.”²⁴

There have been very few studies completed on coping strategies for followers in a toxic leader environment. In one study, researchers developed a list of responses from 76 participants to include problem solving such as confronting the leader, formal complaints, or practicing well-being exercises, seeking support from mentors, colleague, family or friends, escaping the

situation such as resigning, retiring, bypassing or ignoring the leader, reframing such as seeking professional support, positive thinking, humor, or maintaining professionalism. They also listed negative patterns of coping such as feelings of helplessness, self-blame, working harder, or rumination.²⁵ Some articles give thoughts on how to help cope. Reed gives the advice to break the train of thought of mistreatment and let it go as toxic leaders are typically unconcerned with how their actions impact others.²⁶

Dr. Lipman-Blumen gives five thoughts of perspective for tolerating a toxic leader which are looking for opportunities: “to exercise leadership, sharpen one’s own ideals and learn what not to do from a negative role model, to build self-esteem and discover one’s superior moral authority, for sufferers to vent their complaints and bond with one another, to learn how to resist and organize resistance.”²⁷ Members of the military have different systems in place than civilian organizations that sometimes inhibit potential corrective actions which can be taken. There are still different modes of resiliency which can be accomplished for those facing this situation.

Comprehensive Airmen Fitness Model

There are many types of resiliency factors that have been studied and offered for individual growth. For the sake of this paper, the Comprehensive Airmen Fitness (CAF) Model will be used. The Air Force promotes resiliency through four pillars: physical, mental, social, and spiritual. CAF is a roadmap for Airmen to think about how to be wholly fit both on and off duty no matter the circumstance.

CAF was designed to equip “Airmen with the tools and skills required to continually assess and adjust, or calibrate, to their environment by allowing them to maintain the necessary balance of cognitive skill, physical endurance, emotional stamina, and spiritual well-being needed to execute our central mission—to fly, fight and win in air, space and cyberspace.”²⁸

Section 3: In Depth-Analysis of Method

Interview method

The 19 interviews were either done in person or over a telecommunications method such as Facebook messenger (video and/or audio) and phone program. To find the participants for this research, an email describing the research was sent to Chaplain Corps personnel who have there was previous interaction with the author. Some of those personnel also forwarded the email asking for more participants. In the end, 19 responded and gave their experiences. The participants were asked questions that were open-ended questions and were designed not to lead the interviewees in particular answers. The books *Learning from Strangers* by Robert Weiss and *Constructing Effective Questionnaires* by Robert Peterson were read to help prepare for the interview question construction. The books *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military* by George Reed, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians and How We Can Survive Them* by Jean Lipman-Blumen, and a plethora of articles on toxic leadership were read to understand the problem of toxic leaders before the interviews took place.

The questions were set into distinct categories. The first category was designed to derive insights into the some of the dynamics of a toxic leader. The questions for this category were: What characteristics, attributes, or traits of toxic leadership could you identify in the leader(s) which you encountered? What happened to the leader? How were they viewed from outside of the organization?

The next category was designed encourage comments about team dynamics and how the team was affected by the toxic leader and if they coped together. The questions for this category were: How did it affect the team? How did the team cope?

The final category was to understand the individual and how they experienced the toxic leader, any coping mechanisms and recovery, and how the experience may have affected their leadership. The questions for this category were: How did it affect you personally? How did you cope while you were in the situation? How did you recover after that experience? How did it affect your leadership?

Appendix A provides a synopsis of each interview.

Background Data of Contributors

The 19 participants of these interviews were chaplains and chaplain assistants that volunteered to be interviewed to share their experiences. The majority of them wished to remain anonymous and to keep the names of the toxic leaders anonymous for a variety of reasons. These reasons mostly fell into two categories with the first being they did not trust the Chaplain Corps and felt that their careers would be in jeopardy. The second main category was that they wanted to protect the toxic leader acknowledging that in a different environment such as pastoring a church after retirement the leader might not exhibit the same traits. To keep the continuity, all the participants and leaders mentioned will not be identified.

Of the 19 persons interviewed, 13 were chaplains and six were chaplain assistants. The time of serving in the Chaplain Corps ranged from six years to 24 years with an average time of 11.6 years. One individual did not give a number of toxic leaders but instead numbered it as half of the leaders they served. Of the rest, the occurrence of toxic leaders ranged from one to seven chaplains that were personally experienced and one to five chaplain assistants. Not all individuals experienced chaplain assistant toxic leaders. The average for those who gave numbers was 2.7 chaplains and 1.9 chaplain assistants of those who were affected by chaplain assistants.

Most of the participants and toxic leaders were active duty service members. One individual who was interviewed was in the Air Guard during their time as a chaplain assistant and two individuals are in the Air Force Reserve. Two Air Guard chaplains were identified as toxic leaders through the interview sessions. The majority were male with only one female interviewed. Ethnicity is not certain due to not knowing some of the individuals who volunteered to be interviewed though the majority of the group was Caucasian with at least four individuals being African American. Faith dynamics were not always discussed but the majority seemed to be from a Protestant background, to include a few of minority sects of denominations represented in the Air Force. There was also one Catholic priest. There was also one retired chaplain assistant who was not part of the interview process who stated that she never experienced someone she would consider to be a toxic leader.

Section 4: Discussion of the Case Study Results

Leadership is subjective study because at its essence leadership is an influence process. Case studies produce credence to experiences, especially when the experiences echo one another in a variety of ways. However, because of the diverse nature of humanity, there are differences as well but such diversity underlines the complex nature of human interaction. These case studies are useful in deriving a greater understanding of the lived experience of those who are subjected to toxic leadership, but the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population

Toxic Leader Dynamics

The experiences of those subjected under the toxic leadership differ across case studies. There were some similarities that could be identified as common themes including: how the leader viewed themselves, how they treated others, and a perceived lack of self-awareness. The case studies also shared if they knew how those outside the time viewed the leader and what

happened to the leader in their career.

Respondents noted that toxic leaders frequently demonstrated a narcissistic attitude. There were four chaplains who used the word narcissism but there were several other chaplains that gave other words to describe this character trait. One chaplain observed that the leader was very concerned with how other people viewed them.²⁹ Another chaplain described the toxic leader as “the smartest guy in the room” which while he was indeed smart but also was arrogant.³⁰ Several of the participants talked about the inflated sense of self or the perception of self. Arrogance was mentioned several times as the leaders would have a stronger image of themselves than reality.

A focus of careerism would be another aspect of narcissism described by several of the participants. Approximately six of the case studies mentioned careerism in some form. One mentioned that the toxic leader would “build their career off the backs of others.”³¹ Another stated that they “stepped on people to get promoted.”³²

Many of those interviewed spoke also of style of leadership. Three chaplains used the word micromanage though there were other terms such as control freak and dictator that were used as well to describe the same trait. One chaplain assistant stated that the toxic leadership did not trust the team which led them to interfering with everyone’s job.³³ Another chaplain stated that the toxic leader simply did not care about anyone else’s perspective.³⁴

That is not to say that all the toxic leaders experienced in these case studies came across appearing competent and knowledgeable. Sometimes the leader could infect the environment with toxicity with their incompetence. One chaplain assistant spoke about some of the leadership he experienced. Some of his leaders were inexperienced in supervising others and took on tasks incompetently because of lack of trust of their team as well as their inexperience.³⁵ Another

chaplain assistant spoke of the leader being laissez faire in management due to a lack of competence while being narrow-minded and micromanaged on the issues that did not matter.³⁶ One chaplain spoke of the false humility and failure to help because of his incompetence, shrugging and telling individuals, “Good luck with that.”³⁷

Another trend that emerged is the way that the toxic leader treated others. This ranged in a lot of different experiences. A few of the Chaplain Corps personnel would describe the leader as manipulative. One described his inconsistent experience at the hands of a toxic leader. After being yelled at in a public restaurant and being humiliated in front of others, he was later pulled into the office and told that he was one of the best chaplains that the base had.³⁸ Another observed that the toxic leader he experienced would play head games such as give time off and then take it away.³⁹

Several individuals spoke of the explosive character of the toxic leaders they experienced. Some described having to walk on eggshells while others would speak of the berating, demeaning, condescending, and yelling that they experienced. One chaplain assistant described her leader as “moody” and “would never know if it was going to be a good day or bad.”⁴⁰ Others would describe the attacks as personal by attacking one’s character or physical stature such as calling them “pudgy” or “fat boy.”⁴¹

Several of the case study interviews also brought up the issue of favoritism. This thought application of the concept varied, with bases differing over a range of preferences, including sexism, racism, or theological proclivities. One individual stated that the leadership was not committed to ecumenicalism and disregarded the views, and gave fewer opportunities, to those with whom the leader did not share a close theological understanding.⁴² Favoritism could also be based on the mood of the leader and could change without warning. One chaplain mentioned that

depending upon the events around the office; he was charged with being responsible for more visible activities to do after another fellow captain fell out of favor with the toxic leader.⁴³

Another chaplain assistant also spoke that the identity of the office favorite was dependent upon the leader's mood.⁴⁴

It is important to note that even though some behaviors attributed to a toxic leader may also been seen in an excellent leader or in a leader who is not good but is not quite toxic as well. One chaplain stated that toxic leaders also have many of the same characteristics of a successful leader.⁴⁵ There are many tremendously smart chaplains that are extremely hard working, who can accomplish the missions, who are knowledgeable, experienced, and can win individual and team awards yet are not toxic with their teams or spread venom into the work environment. Likewise there are some chaplains who are introverted, stuck into their office, and may or may not know face interpersonal challenges yet who are not toxic to their teams. One may be interested in their career and show ambition without negating the care for others in helping them in their career as well. Toxic leaders often may share the same characteristics of successful leader, yet they have an inordinately negative impact on others.

The majority of the chaplains also spoke of toxic leaders as not being self-aware. One chaplain described his interaction with a toxic leader after he was not under his authority any longer. The chaplain said that the leader said that the chaplain should feel so thrilled to sit with him, given all the knowledge and experience the leader had about the job. The chaplain who had been subordinate replied that it was his own self-perception in why he thought that he was arrogant and did not like people.⁴⁶

While all those interviewed felt that the majority of those on the team would identify the leader as toxic, many had mixed responses to how those outside the team viewpoints. Some did

not know because they were not in a position to know. Some felt that no one knew because results got produced along with team and individual awards. Others felt like their leadership might have had an idea but did not really know. This was seen in one individual who was approached by his wing commander and asked in a probing way or another individual who was told by leadership that the toxic leader chaplain seemed more like a line officer than a chaplain.⁴⁷ Other toxic leaders were known both by leadership on base and in the Chaplain Corps structure.

None of the individuals interviewed directly initiated any kind of investigation into the toxic leader and the environment that was produced. One was in an investigation because of an incident of that sparked an inquiry, which the leader was removed from their position.⁴⁸ Another shared their experiences with a separate IG complaint for the sake of another individual who started it.⁴⁹ Several felt like they would not start an investigation because they did not feel like they could prove it. One even said, “What am I supposed to say? My boss is a toxic leader and by the way I won CGO of the quarter thanks to him?”⁵⁰ Another chaplain was threatened not to share and if they did, the leader promised to make their life a lot worse than it already was.⁵¹ In several case studies, the participants also felt like reporting the situation would not be helpful because the toxic leader would be well connected to those who had the potential to help so therefore nothing would get done.

What happened to the toxic leader also varied between cases. Many of the case study participants felt that the leader was always not held accountable, even if their behavior spanned an entire career. One base was told from a previous base that they should keep paperwork on a toxic leader because the previous base had failed to do so.⁵² In some instances the toxic leader was found out and never got promoted and was placed in a situation where they were either forced to retire or was placed in an administrative role where they were not in charge of others

and their careers were stunted. One captain chaplain was told that sometimes Chaplain Corps leadership would try to mentor a chaplain to see if they could be change and be placed in leadership again. Some leaders, however, were not found out and continued to be promoted to higher echelons or get selected for choice assignments or schools. In one case the leader refused to admit wrong doing, showing his lack of self-awareness claiming, “Sometimes you have to break a few eggs to create an omelet.”⁵³

Team Affects and Coping

In thinking about the characteristics, traits and attributes of a toxic leader, it is easy to hypothesize that they help create an environment which makes it difficult for teams to succeed. The case studies showed a variety of responses from teams in how they were affected as well as how they coped if they did cope. Some teams were able to succeed despite the toxic leader while others were disconnected. Some of the disconnected teams remained disconnected throughout the tenure of the toxic leader while others were able to rally themselves and find ways to grow together through the experience.

Some participants reported that their team was not a team. One chaplain described his team as remaining disconnected with the team gossiping and distant from each other until the toxic leaders were removed and a new chaplain was placed in command. The new leadership, understanding the toxic leader beforehand, brought the team together in conversation.⁵⁴ A chaplain assistant stated that the team she experienced was ineffective.⁵⁵ In another case, a chaplain said it was easy for Captains to avoid the chapel while conducting unit ministry.⁵⁶ This was seen in another case with a chaplain assistant who stated that the team members avoiding the toxic climate caused greater stress because if they needed a chaplain, they would not be able to find one.⁵⁷

One chaplain mentioned that some of the teams in which he participated in went away from doing good will because of being in survival mode and some were split because of rank or other perceived grouping.⁵⁸ One chaplain described his team as dysfunctional in how it operated because of how the teams were separate and treated differently, yet they still continued to win team awards.⁵⁹ Another chaplain assistant described his teams as learning to communicate with each other but still fragmented and looking after their own interests.⁶⁰ Yet another described how the team would have individual teams with him and his chaplain going on walks when they were stressed to talk it out.⁶¹

Others reported that there was a separation from the team for a period of time before they started coping well together. In a case where the toxic leader helped facilitate competition between the CGO chaplains, eventually the team began to recognize the behaviors and began to have pre-staff meetings and would default to the deputy wing chaplain with the answers discussed beforehand in the real staff meetings.⁶² Another chaplain talked about having secret meetings with team members that they could trust which acted as a support group. This trust would come after a time of sharing a little bit of information to see if the other military member's experience was the same.⁶³ Another chaplain spoke by employing his organizational skills for his own purposes, the team to rally to him and see him as an unofficial leader which helped the team begin to function together.⁶⁴

Some teams seemed to cope well together throughout the shared experience. One participant reported that the team huddled as a team with each other throughout the toxic leader's tenure.⁶⁵ One chaplain spoke of the CGOs chaplains having lunches with each other which contributed with the team cohesiveness and with individualized support with one another.⁶⁶ At times the team was able to be shielded somewhat from the toxic leader when a middle manager

such as a Deputy Wing Chaplain or the senior ranking chaplain assistant took the brunt of the attacks and protected the team.

Personal Affects and Coping

Not only are teams affected by the toxic leader but the different individuals on the teams are influenced in a variety of ways. Some react to the stress and cope poorly, others have a period of time where they did not cope well but had a turning point which helped them think differently about the situation, and others had processes which helped them manage their lives through this difficult period of time. Likewise some were able to achieve a level of healing after the fact and some still felt that they carried the scars from their toxic leaders. All had lessons they had learned and could apply to their lives and leadership styles.

Chaplains had a variety of effects in their personal lives. One chaplain spoke of the stress being worse than the experience of his wife's cancer or living through hurricane Katrina. He mentioned that he had a lack of sleep, lack of appetite, depression, lost ten pounds, wanting to avoid work and this individual.⁶⁷ Another chaplain said that the stresses made "it nearly impossible to serve and support the mission for others as you went into survival mode to protect your own his life, family, and career from the one who was trying to destroy you."⁶⁸ Sometimes the stress would cause physical consequences such as one chaplain assistant who started experiencing dizzy spells.⁶⁹ Another chaplain assistant spoke of the desperation, hopelessness, and persistent anger that weren't just fleeting thoughts but stayed with him longer then he would have liked to admit.⁷⁰

Two chaplains compared their respective experiences to "battered wife syndrome." One described it as "You are manipulated. You are abused. Then told how great you are. You are beat up in front of others and then behind closed doors told you are the only chaplain that can do

anything around here which is why I depend upon you. You are such a great guy.”⁷¹ The other described it that the leaders would keep the team members isolated and afraid while at the same time made it seem like they were taking care of the team through awards and other means.⁷²

Some Chaplain Corps personnel reported not coping well. One chaplain said his coping mechanism was to eat.⁷³ Another simply stated that he did not cope well and started to smoke and drink occasionally to help ease the stress. While he did not engage in these habits excessively, it went against his personal faith which added on more guilt to a stressful situation.⁷⁴ Another said that he did not cope well and did all the things he said you should not do such as instead of reaching out for support, isolated himself, instead of focusing on what he could control, he would just be angry.⁷⁵ A chaplain assistant reported that even though he tried healthy coping mechanisms such as spirituality or physical activity, it did not help. He stated that he was able to achieve temporary relief through various activities to include the use of substances but nothing helped long-term and said that his divorce was partially to blame due to the stressors at work.⁷⁶

Others reported that they did not cope well until a turning point in the period of time with the toxic leader. One chaplain assistant had family medical issues and a brother-in-law passing away which changed his perspective to spend more time with his family and traveling and less time working hard for no recognition.⁷⁷

One chaplain mentioned that a turning point for him was when he was involved in a life altering event on the base, such as a suicide. From there he would reframe it to recognize that there were others who had it much worse. He would then he would not get caught up in the “narrow or toxic world” of the leader.⁷⁸ Another chaplain spoke of the initial shock and how he internalized it all. His releases would include would blowing up at his wife and as well as other

destructive tendencies before realizing his need to open up and speak to his wife about what was happening at work.⁷⁹

Some Chaplain Corps personnel were able to find ways to cope in the toxic environment. Different Chaplains Corps personnel employed a mixture of self-care techniques in helping them to make it through the tumultuous times they faced. While none mentioned the CAF model in their perspective of managing their experience, various components of the four dimensions of well-being were described as being employed.

The relational pillar seemed to be the biggest help for some of the Chaplain Corps personnel in coping during the situation. There were three basic three groups of relationships that offered support to those who utilized their network. The first group of relationships was family members to include spouses. This was spoken about in many of the interviews. The second group was friends to include church community, other military members of the same rank, and at times other members in the chapel. One chaplain assistant spoke about having her faith community pray for her during difficult times and a few others shared in this thought.⁸⁰ The final group comprised of mentors to include those inside the Chaplain Corps as well as those outside the Chaplain Corps. One chaplain had some senior mentors who helped normalize the situation by sharing their own toxic leadership experiences.⁸¹

Several participants spoke of the physical pillar as a source of coping. One stated that he was a gym rat.⁸² Another said that running provided a good sense of stress relief.⁸³ Another stated that he tried to work out to include participating in intramural sports with his squadron he was assigned to which helped get him away from the stresses of the chapel.⁸⁴

There were various mental pillar techniques which helped different Chaplain Corps personnel as well. One chaplain was given advice from a senior leader to keep MFRs in case

there was any reason for them in the future. Not only did it help to keep records if they were ever needed but he also spoke that they served as a journal that proved therapeutic.⁸⁵ Another spoke of having healthy boundaries which enabled him to say no if needed or to confront the leader to address a situation that may have arisen.⁸⁶ One chaplain assistant used problem solving skills to help get the toxic leader to assist when he needed something by playing to his ego and telling him how great he was.⁸⁷

There are also thoughts of protecting one's personal time, if you were able. One chaplain spoke of taking time off and visiting countries.⁸⁸ One chaplain assistant spoke of trying to go home on time, which is different than his normal nature of be willing to stay late to accomplish the mission. This allowed him to spend time away from the toxic environment in the positive influence of family and friends.⁸⁹

As one would hope to expect with those employed in the chaplaincy, the spiritual pillar was utilized by the majority of the participants interviewed. One chaplain spoke of the spiritual foundation helping him realize that all of "life was a TDY" which helped him keep perspective. He also spoke the importance of reframing things in prayer, keeping in mind the calling which helped keep the perspective of his life, and "the spiritual fitness piece if it is alive then it is indestructible."⁹⁰ Another spoke about enacting the spiritual principles in living his religion, and began fasting and praying for the leader, serving him by taking on meetings for the leader and other ways of caring for him. It was during this time that he began to think about the abusive childhood that the leader experienced, and as soon as he began to experience unconditional love for the leader he was transferred to another department.⁹¹

Some of the participants interviewed indicated that they have not recovered from the time they were subordinate to toxic leaders. One chaplain spoke of avoiding other chaplains because

of his experiences.⁹² Another is still not trusting of other chaplains or the Chaplain Corps in general.⁹³ Yet another has stated they have recovered some but still have a hard time trusting higher ranking chaplains.⁹⁴ One spoke of not trusting of others on his team because he assumed that they would be sharing stories about him.⁹⁵

Several chaplains and chaplain assistants spoke about their time or the individual leaving the base was very helpful in recovering from toxic leadership. “Time and distance” has been the biggest healing factor for one chaplain in particular but others shared similar sediments using different wording.⁹⁶ Two others have been able to process their encounters through a pastoral residency program called Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in which group discussions helped bring peace of mind to their toxic experiences.

Normalization has helped other chaplains as well. One chaplain spoke about new leadership who understood what the team went through started to engage the team in discussions and healing practices. He shared that as he shared he also learned that other team members had the same experiences he did; he felt relief from the pain which he had kept internalized.⁹⁷ Another learned of a Command Directed Investigation (CDI) being conducted on the leader because of his toxicity among other things, felt vindicated that he could trust his instincts and that he was not crazy.⁹⁸

One shared that reframing the situation after leaving helped in their healing. This chaplain began to look at the environment and everything going on and “started to blame the circumstances which the leader he experienced did the best that he was able with who he was with the hand which he was dealt.” This helped in forgiving the individual and releasing anger and bitterness.⁹⁹

Several of the Chaplain Corps personnel stated that there were several thoughts which

helped influence their leadership paradigm. All of the chaplains and chaplain assistants spoke in a manner which made it sound like they were more self-aware in how they treat others and subordinates because of their experiences. One chaplain stated that he “was very aware of how he impacts that he leads, the power that he holds and wields effects lives and family” due to his experiences under toxic leaders.¹⁰⁰

Several of the participants stated that they knew that they did not want to be like the toxic leader. One even stated that he “did not want to be a dirt bag.”¹⁰¹ Another thought in terms with how he was damaged he felt in not being taken care of to ensure that those who are subordinate to him so that none would never feel that they were not cared for even in differences.¹⁰² One chaplain set time with his subordinates not just to get to know them but also to get feedback concerning his supervisory role.¹⁰³ Another chaplain spoke about how his tendency is to be more loving though at times he has been hesitant to discipline because of his experiences.¹⁰⁴

Section 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Any organization faces the potential of toxic leadership. This research has helped develop some ideas on how participants and teams can cope in a toxic environment. This can provide a glimpse for counselors who are helping those who are subordinate to a toxic leader. It can also help build understanding for those leaders who have a subordinate who has recently experienced toxic leadership. However, this study is a limited study in the scope based on the number of interviewed. As such, there is much room for additional research.

This research paper acknowledges that there can be the potential for bias due to the voluntary participation. One potential for research could be an additional survey research of a quantitative nature is necessary to answer questions about the scope and nature of the phenomenon the Air Force or in any particular career field such as the Chaplain Corps. There

could also be a study accomplished finding the different perspectives of the same experiences. This particular research paper had no overlap in case study cases. This could also look at relationships between the leader and the led. The fact that none of the participants directly instigated an investigation into a leader in whom they thought was toxic could mean that there is a lack of reporting throughout the Air Force Chaplain Corps. This could be due to loyalty to the chain of command or could mean that there is distrust in the organization itself. There could be more research into this area as well.

There could also be additional research done for teams and individuals into coping and recovering from a toxic leader. This research paper only offers a few case studies and does not offer the effectiveness of coping techniques. There is very little research which addresses these topics.

Finally, there is always room for research on the subject of toxic leadership. There could be a study on the lack of emotional intelligence to see how it interacts with toxic leadership. Also in thinking about the various career fields that face leadership challenges, each career field faces its own problems particularly related to leadership development. For example, the chaplains in the Air Force do not start supervising until they become a Major. There is little supervisory opportunity for a Staff Sergeant on the chaplain assistant career field. The Air Force Chaplain Corps has started addressing toxic leadership in the recent years. One of the ways which they have addressed the issue is by developing an intermediate course in 2013 called Chaplain Spiritual Leadership Course aimed at mid-level Captains which discusses toxic leadership. A study could be conducted on the effectiveness of this course or if there is a more effective way to help minimize toxic leadership in the chaplain ranks.

One potential fix that could help others feel safe in reporting the toxic leader would be to

have a chaplain who does not supervise provide spiritual care for agencies like the Inspector General that could have the potential to help in situations such as these. Currently most wing chaplains take care of the wing staff agencies. This would at least provide one avenue where any member on the team could approach the agencies without feeling that the wing chaplain was already connected so therefore they would not be believed.

Another approach to help those in subordinate positions to have a safe outlet would be to implement a 360-degree feedback which is given to the next step up. This has been suggested in various Air University research papers and has models in other services and companies which could be based up. This would allow supervisors of toxic leaders who might not normally be aware of the problem to be privy to subordinates experiences. Commanders already have this implemented in squadron climate surveys but could be worked to the individual feedback sessions

Toxic leadership can infiltrate any organization. There are many ways that a leader can infect an organization and spread venom though characteristics such as narcissism view of themselves, how they treated others, and a lack of self-awareness. This can have disastrous effects on teams which some are able to huddle together and make it through while others falter for a time or throughout the tenure of a toxic leader. Individuals are also affected and some are able to cope even as others struggle to find ways to survive. Even after an experience like this, some remain scarred while others have rewritten the story to find healing.

Appendix A: Case Study Synopsis

Case #1 – AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 24 years. He has experienced four chaplains and three chaplain assistants that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: they needed to be the most popular, nothing you could do could turn their wrath away, would be personal in attacks and included name calling, would play head games like would give time off and then pull it back, would couch their behavior in the mission, would be very concerned about their public image, would never be held accountable for their actions, micromanages, kept they business of the chapel operations a secret, isolated the team, constantly win awards, narcissism, building their careers off the back of others, did not allow private conversations

Team: would have secret meeting, would have an unofficial support group, peer care

Experience of toxic leader: initial shock, question yourself more, took anger home, isolate yourself to decompress, living in the next assignment, untrusting of team, missed joy of present, missed opportunities, increased eating, worked harder with toxic leaders to try to avoid their venom

Coped: confided in wife more, prayer and worship more intentional, normalization, closer to the team, asked outside leaders for advice, can learn lessons from all leaders, looked forward to deployments/tdys, every leader survived toxic leaders, journaling/documentation therapeutic

Recovered/Influenced leadership: Helping others, dignity and respect, great sensitivity to climate

Case #2 – AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 14 years. He has experienced two chaplains that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: lack of humility, control freak,

micromanaging, dictator, directive style, sometimes same characteristics of successful leader, narcissism, braggadocios, smartest guy in the room, very smart, very hard working, knowledgeable, experienced, puffed up, arrogant, against others, perfectionist, always needed a whipping boy, “one right way, his way”, self-unawareness, belittling, those beneath him were inferior, record keeper

Team: team was negative, afraid

Experience of toxic leader: shut down, traumatized, did not want to go to work, no energy, lack of appetite, in tears, far more difficult than wife having cancer, lost 10 pounds of stress, lack of sleep

Coped: spoke with mentors, running helped destress, healthy home life, team encouragement, drank a bit more, Tylenol pm to sleep

Recovered/Influenced leadership: time has helped, hard lessons learned, positive effect on leadership, better way to lead people

Case #3 - AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 9 years. He has experienced four chaplains that he would consider to be toxic leaders.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader: poor self-reflection, too busy for spiritual life, rarely did spiritual disciplines, concerned more about the rank of an officer than a chaplain, rarely left the office, charismatic especially with wing leadership, gave no grace but demanded such, created meaningless tasks to create competition amongst CGOs, constantly acted threatened by compliments about CGOs, jumped to conclusions before facts, no team building, undercut in front of everyone else, not approachable, insecure, pride, perfectionist, manipulative

Team: some team members had physical problems like throwing up or diarrhea, other health problems, gossip, and substance abuse

Experience from toxic leader: nightmares, restless sleep, poor health, less time for God, weight gain, at times would throw up before work, time with family compromised, preoccupied with work, occasional smoking, drinking, worked 12-14 hour days, unbelievable pressure, constantly worried about minor mistakes

Coped: admitted to not coping well, at times used substances for relief, contemplated suicide, had some good parishioners and supportive family

Recovered/Influenced leadership: talked with team and found out they were not alone, new leadership was intentional on healing, learning boundaries, allowed self-care, CDI was conducted and found conclusive

Case #4 – AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 14 years. He has experienced three chaplains that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: had favoritism, sexism, racism, loud, yelling, berating, demeaning, intimidating, self-centered, narcissism, stepping on egg shells never know when you will mess up, lack of trust, did not respect others time, inflexible

Team: staff did not want to go into work, dreaded it, deputy wing chaplain stick in the middle, always minding what you said, no vulnerability, guarded, team coped by talked together like deployment

Experience of toxic leader: Was fortunate that was about and about and did not get stuck as much as deputy wing chaplain

Coped: tended to be resilient

Recovered/Influenced leadership: talked with team members, be self-aware, contrast leadership, help growth, discipline at all times

Case #5 – AD Chaplain (Priest) who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 22 years. He has experienced five chaplains (4AD/1Guard) that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: did not care about others perspective, three had bad relationships with their fathers, inflated sense of self, talked about self, none were happy, hard to take criticism, unhappy people, isolated, pulled the wool over the eyes of others, took care of themselves not their people, had reasons why they were right and others were wrong, jackass

Team: some spouses very supportive, some gathered together, can get depressed and frustrated

Experience of toxic leader: very stressed, road blocked in career, disgruntled

Coped: fight for self, own validation, plan and protect time off, took a break, “This too shall pass”, golf, ability to care for others, daily go to prayer, supported each other, cannot let them suffocate you, reframe out of Jesus, called parents

Recovered/Influenced leadership: follow on assignment, reframe things in prayer, do not dwell on it, do not duplicate it, lessons learned, pushed over on the loving side

Case #6 – Reservist Chaplain Assistant who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 6 years. He has experienced two chaplains and 3 chaplain assistants that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: opportunistic, cared more about rank, lack of genuineness, no warmth, task orientated, possibly burned out or strained

Team: some divide, trapped between spiritual ministry and military did not want to serve, second

guess actions

Experience of toxic leader: saddened by the people they were helping, anxiety

Coped: kept boundaries, helped others, understood human elements, self reflection, care for caregiver, prayer and exercise

Recovered/Influenced leadership: makes you grow, consider the whole story, patience

Case #7 – Guard Chaplain Assistant who had been in the Chaplain Corps for 7.5 years. He has experienced two chaplains (1 AD/1 Guard) and 1 chaplain assistant that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: do not like to be challenged, do not deal with stress well, presented themselves larger than they were, lack of insight

Team: were not a team, they avoided work

Experience of toxic leader: more fatigued, more cautious, more stressed, stressed marriage, dizzy spells

Coped: played to their grandiose, coped with another chaplain with walk and talks, did not cope well

Recovered/Influenced leadership: do not want to be a dirt bag

Case #8 –AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 11 years. He has experienced one chaplain and one chaplain assistant that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: no empathy, failure to receive feedback, careerist, everyone else was expendable, power trip, closed off, micromanager, good on paper, efficient staff writer closed off, claimed credit, disregarded criticism, won team awards

spiritually questionable

Team: staff became adverse, divided staff, staff organized and cut leader out of some things

Experience of toxic leader: relationships were harsh, questioned whether or not was going to stay in, physically high stress level, disillusioned

Coped: avoidance, connected with other pastors, found others you could trust, focus on things you could enjoy, prayed with others

Recovered/Influenced leadership: reconciled with other team members, when you know the end helps, telling the story, be open to feedback, do not be like this

Case #9 –AD Chaplain Assistant who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 11 years. She has experienced one chaplain and one chaplain assistant that she would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: negative attitude, hard to see any positivity, not a strong back bone to stand for what is right, favoritism, passive aggressive, moody, never know if it will be a good day or bad day, not trustworthy

Team: lots of friction, distant from the environment

Experience of toxic leader: did not feel like there was open communication, tried not to go to them for anything, mentally took a toll, stressful, walking on eggshells, morale was low, felt like it was a hostile environment

Coped: praying, support from other positive people, prayer from others family, advice from others, try to keep positive and motivated doing things enjoyed, involved in other activities outside that environment

Recovered/Influenced leadership: took it as a learning experience, do not want to be like that as a leader, going to next leadership, next assignment

Case #10 –AD Chaplain Assistant who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 7 years. He has experienced three chaplains and one chaplain assistant that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: bad supervisory, did not take care of the people, careerism, stepped on people, won team awards, sexism

Team: team turned on each other, chaplains were unhappy, wrong priorities, chaplain verse chaplain assistants

Experience of toxic leader: rough emotionally, difficult environment, frustrating work, lack of support, could not sleep, anger, affected mood, on edge, did not trust, walls up

Coped: streamlined work, gym, reduced stress, family and friends, hobbies, left on time, supervisor helped a lot

Recovered/Influenced leadership: PCS'd, learned lessons, come out a stronger person, sharing with people who went through it, reflection, more self-aware, what not to do in leadership

Case #11 – AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 16 years. He has experienced about half his leaders that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: arrogance, perception of themselves, careerist, at least as sick as everyone else, lack of self-awareness, sense of self, clueless or careless blessed by Corps cursed by command, authority oppressiveness

Team: did not trust, walked on eggshells, hated life

Experience of toxic leader: feasters and grows, seeps into every area starting with work

Coped: healthy home, eat healthy, stay in shape, stay engaged in other things, talk, find someone

Recovered/Influenced leadership: getting into a healthy environment, be sensitive, practice what your preach

Case #12 –AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for seven years. He has experienced three chaplains that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: Intimidation, abuse of authority, misunderstanding of leadership in the military, verbally assaulted, condescending, take care of career over people, nepotism, favoritism, information controlled

Team: professional, ineffective, inefficient, creativity stifled, low morale, afraid to fail, affected interpersonal relationships, alliances formed, team did not cope together

Experience of toxic leader: cried on wife's lap, hated going to work, wanted to get out, kept head down, do not make waves, did not feel like it would do any good to try to do anything

Coped: gym, playing base intermural sports team, found mentors outside the chapel corps, kept family unit strong, pretty resilient, kept God's calling, kept spiritual disciplines, dismissed some of it, found things to do outside the chapel, knowing that person would PCS

Recovered/Influenced leadership: probably have not recovered, still not trusting of the chaplain corps or leadership

Case #13 –AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 13 years. He has experienced two chaplains that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: not convicted to ecumenical, idealistic, lined up with common theologies, no confidence in themselves to lead others, no faith to invest energy, disregard others they did not have concern over, not objective feedback,

presented only to those they liked, did not appreciate creativity, justified themselves, out of the blue would yell at you, spread toxic around the corps

Team: lack of communication

Experience of toxic leader: hits you at the core, self-esteem effected, not used to full capacity, missed opportunities, lack of creativity, emotional effect when being yelled at, lonely situation

Coped: not being reactive, not fighting back, neutral stance, personal faith, prayer, mentoring, growing process

Recovered/Influenced leadership: intentionally forget, people move on, move on, CPE, talked with peers

Case #14 –Reservist Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for four years. He has experienced one chaplain and one chaplain assistant that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: did not recognize contagious nature of leadership, inability to accept responsibility, “good luck with that” attitude in having others solve problems, incompetent, ball of confusion, no guardrails on performance, no focus, everything he touched was sullied, atmosphere and attitude, false humility

Team: team degeneration, sharp people who left, everyone doing their own thing

Experience of toxic leader: ruminate over things that happened or might happen, makes you question if it is worth it, dry like a dessert season, expected it to be spirit focused, disappointment, underwhelmed with leadership

Coped: instead looking to be led, instead of leading yourself, seeing own value in the team, develop own identity with work, stop complaining and start praying for him, talked with other chaplains every week

Recovered/Influenced leadership: take responsibility, take a step back to make sure that not everyone is the same way

Case #15 –AD Chaplain Assistant who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 6 years. He has experienced four chaplains and two chaplain assistants that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: argued, cussed out, nasty attitude, beat up on people, not accountable, did not know about leading, did not focus on important things, worked the system, did not trust the team, produced but did not develop the team, abuse of power, paycheck job, immature

Team: burnt out team, worked long days, team was stuck, was like working for bad parents but the kids knew what needed to be done

Experience of toxic leader: long hours, stressful, effected marriage early on, no recognition or career promotion

Coped: life gave a different perspective, worked out

Recovered/Influenced leadership: leaving team, take care of people, helps mentor

Case #16 –AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 9 years. He has experienced one chaplain that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: carless leader, very little regard for personal problems, disrespected theological differences and females in ministry, poor concept of leading

Team: pulled tighter and tighter in support of one another

Experience of toxic leader: family time lost, scarred even today

Coped: coped with wife and teammates

Recovered/Influenced leadership: recovered with CPE, treat others with greater respect, be self-aware

Case #17 –AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 9 years. He has experienced two chaplains and one chaplain assistant that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: very angry, extremely insecure, narcissist, twisted things to make himself look good and others not look good, getting control, two faced, devious, self absorbed, one leader had a CDI and removed from leadership but eventually became in position over others again

Team: all chaplain assistants ended up in mental health, team would be out of the toxic leaders path as best as able, team grouped together

Experience of toxic leader: depression, anger, stress level high, panic attacks, considered getting out of the Air Force, did not drink enough and ended up with some kidney problems

Coped: tried to work out, intramural volleyball with squadron, took as much as leave as could, supportive family

Recovered/Influenced leadership: after CDI that another initiated gave vindication that he was not crazy and could trust your instincts, pleased to see how Chaplain Corps is taking, still not as trusting of higher ranking chaplains, very aware of the impact he makes on others as he leads them

Case #18 –AD Chaplain who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 15 years. He has experienced

one chaplain that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: always point out what others did wrong, had different standards for different groups

Team: depended upon the team, large team was separated, dysfunctional

Experience of toxic leader: bitter, negative emotions, resigned that could not please the leader, miserable, tired

Coped: did not cope well, was angry

Recovered/Influenced leadership: time and distance helped recover, reframed to blame situation more than the leader, own his part, gives constructive feedback to others

Case #19 –AD Chaplain Assistant who has been in the Chaplain Corps for 15 years. He has experienced seven chaplains and five chaplain assistants that he would consider to be a toxic leader.

Characteristics/traits/attributes of toxic leader experienced: general lack of competence specific to their role, laissez faire to management, inability of considering others ways, narrow-minded, general inclination to disregard the people working for them, lack of acknowledging their word, inability to separate personal and professional issues

Team: team works harder, communication changes, adds stress to the team, less cohesion

Experience of toxic leader: stressful, constantly looked for ways of escape, confrontation made it worse, added stress to marriage and contributed to divorce, hopelessness, desperation, persistent anger

Coped: inability to cope through traditional means, found momentary relief in substances and other means

Recovered/Influenced leadership: still in process of recovery, changed negatively in regards to giving and trusting, leadership style has always been considerate of others

Endnotes

¹ George Reed, PhD., Toxic Leadership, Unit Climate, and Organizational Effectiveness, Air and Space Journal. http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2014/2014-3/2014_3_03_reed_s_eng.pdf, 2014, 4.

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³⁰ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 2, 21 Feb 2016.

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- ³¹ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 1, 20 Feb 2016.
- ³² Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 10, 1 Mar 2016.
- ³³ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 15, 15 Mar 2016.
- ³⁴ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 5, 23 Feb 2016.
- ³⁵ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 15, 15 Mar 2016.
- ³⁶ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 19, 13 Apr 2016.
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- ⁴⁰ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 9, 23 Feb 2016.
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- ⁴² Interview with chaplain, Case Study 13, 15 Mar 2016.
- ⁴³ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 8, 25 Feb 2016.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 9, 23 Feb 2016.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 2, 21 Feb 2016.
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- Interview with chaplain, Case Study 8, 25 Feb 2016.
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- ⁵¹ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 1, 20 Feb 2016.
- ⁵² Interview with chaplain, Case Study 15, 15 Mar 2016.
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- ⁵⁸ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 6, 23 Feb 2016.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 18, 8 Apr 2016.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 19, 13 Apr 2016.
- ⁶¹ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 7, 25 Feb 2016.
- ⁶² Interview with chaplain, Case Study 8, 25 Feb 2016.
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- ⁷² Interview with chaplain, Case Study 1, 20 Feb 2016.
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- ⁷⁵ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 18, 8 Apr 2016.
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- ⁷⁸ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 4, 22 Feb 2016.
- ⁷⁹ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 1, 20 Feb 2016.
- ⁸⁰ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 9, 27 Feb 2016.
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- ⁸² Interview with chaplain, Case Study 11, 2 Mar 2016.
- ⁸³ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 2, 21 Feb 2016.
- ⁸⁴ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 17, 8 Apr 2016.

⁸⁵ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 5, 23 Feb 2016.

⁸⁶ Interview with chaplain assistant Case Study 6, 23 Feb 2016.

⁸⁷ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 7, 25 Feb 2016.

⁸⁸ Interview with chaplain, Case Study 5, 23 Feb 2016.

⁸⁹ Interview with chaplain assistant, Case Study 10, 1 Mar 2016.

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A TDY is a period away from your home station. This could last a few days to a week or even several months.

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