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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

CREATING AWARENESS: TOXIC LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE MARINE CORPS  
OFFICER CORPS

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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** Creating Awareness: Toxic Leadership Within Marine Corps Officer Corps

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**Thesis:** The thesis will explore the level of awareness and focus the Marine Corps places on the topic of toxic leadership. Furthermore, the thesis will highlight the cause and effects toxic leaders have towards organizations and the Marine Corps writ large. Finally, the thesis will propose a need to include toxic leadership within Marine Corps lexicon and doctrine to provide a framework that will create awareness, subsequently inform, and influence Professional Military Education.

**Discussion:** The Marine Corps continues to relieve commanding officers due to command climate related issues. These commanders fostered a toxic working environment resulting in poor command climates that degraded the unit's performance. How is it that hand selected officers reach levels of command and leadership positions without previously being identified as toxic leaders? The thesis will take a look at the Marine Corps Professional Military Education and determine the level of exposure and awareness the topic of toxic leadership receives.

**Conclusion:** In the end, the thesis recommends that including a Marine Corps definition of toxic leadership within Marine Corps leadership doctrine will begin to create awareness while demonstrating a concerted effort towards addressing this problem. Additionally, by including toxic leadership within doctrine, it will provide the necessary framework that will inform Marine Corps leadership courses, and further the exposure of the toxic leadership dilemma.

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## *Table of Contents*

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	ii
DISCLAIMER .....	iii
PREFACE .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
DEFINING TOXIC LEADERSHIP .....	2
CAUSE OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP .....	4
Lack of Self-Awareness .....	4
EXAMPLES OF TRAITS / BEHAVIORS .....	5
Ignoring Feedback .....	5
Zero Defect / High Standards .....	6
Always Wrong .....	6
Counter-Productivity (Busy Work).....	7
Verbal Abuse .....	7
EFFECTS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP .....	8
Fear .....	8
Decreased Communication .....	8
Negative Command Climate .....	9
Decreased Faith in the Institution .....	9
Leaving the Marine Corps .....	10
MARINE CORPS LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY .....	10
CURRENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM .....	12
ORGANIZATIONAL SHORTFALLS .....	18
Culture.....	18
Evaluations System.....	19
Protectors .....	19
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	21
Doctrine.....	21
Professional Military Education .....	22
CONCLUSIONS.....	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	26

## *Preface*

I would like to sincerely thank my wife, Jessica, for her unrelenting support and encouragement throughout this entire process. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Wineman for his guidance, patience, and direction on this journey to make a topic that is so ethereal into something that can be digested by those who seek to gain a better understanding on the issue of toxic leadership. Finally, I would like to thank all of the leaders that have influenced me to become the officer and leader I am today – especially the toxic ones!

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership is an intrinsic quality that is imperative to the success of the Marine Corps in fighting and winning battles. The Marine Corps invests in its human capital through an emphasis on character development as the foundational quality of a good officer. Furthermore, the Corps goes through great lengths by investing in professional military education and training to develop officers, so they have the tools to be effective leaders. Ultimately, officers that excel in their leadership capabilities are screened and selected to lead Marines as battalion/squadron and regimental/group commanders. Despite these efforts to develop officers, command-selected officers continue to be relieved due to command climate issues.<sup>1</sup> The environments these commanders fostered were categorized as toxic environments. The thesis will define toxic leadership as it pertains to the cases of the relieved commanders. Defining toxic leadership will serve as a way to differentiate the average leaders that lose their temper from time to time, and have the occasional bad day from the toxic leaders. Moreover, the thesis will focus on command-selected leaders that have demonstrated a career-long record of outstanding performance and leadership. As such, the thesis takes a look at leader development within Marine Corps professional military education and training to better understand why command-selected officers continue to be relieved due to command climate reasons stemming from toxic leadership.

The relieved commanders' generally displayed behavior that was considered detrimental to a unit's overall climate. Regardless, any of the relieved commanders could have argued he or she was a victim of a politically correct environment; meaning, they failed to conform to a belief where language and practices that could offend political sensibilities should not exist.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, some of the relieved commanders claimed they were misunderstood as abusive or toxic, when in reality they were only being tough, firm, and mission-oriented.<sup>3</sup> The relieved commander's

excuses demonstrate a lack of understanding and awareness on his or her overall adverse actions. Moreover, the relieved commanders seem to have forgotten that a leader is responsible for setting the example and accountable for the morale, discipline, and effectiveness of the unit. These foundational leadership principles are instilled in every Marine officer in Officer Candidate School and continue through the officer's career. The purpose of this thesis is to raise awareness of toxic leadership by highlighting its causes and effects on a unit. Moreover, the thesis will also demonstrate how PME stresses leadership early in an officer's career as he or she advances the less priority leadership has compared to planning, theory of war, and military history. The decline in leadership instruction and emphasis implies that the senior an officer gets, he or she understands leadership and less instruction is required. The reality is that leadership needs to be a career-long endeavor, and high in priority. A shortfall within this thesis is that it only takes a look at resident Marine Corps PME. Further research will be needed to account for Marine leaders attending non-Marine PME and non-resident PME. The thesis does examine how the Marine Corps concepts of mission accomplishment and troop welfare create a leadership dilemma that toxic leaders abuse. Finally, the thesis is not meant to resolve the issue of toxic leadership; however, it is meant to be a start point to formalize toxic leadership within Marine Corps lexicon, leadership development, and professional military education and training.

### **DEFINING TOXIC LEADERSHIP**

When discussing styles of leadership, Doctor George E. Reed, author of *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, recommends keeping two items in mind. First, leadership style is a pattern of behavior over time as perceived by the subordinates. Second, the style has little to do with competence or dedication. In other words, "those who attempt to lead with a destructive style are often highly dedicated and highly motivated to achieve the goals and objectives of the



organization, but they go about accomplishing them in a manner that is counterproductive in the long run.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, according to Dr. Reed, mission accomplishment becomes the driving factor that toxic leaders utilize to excuse their abusive behavior towards the troops. When in reality, mission accomplishment and troop welfare should be equally significant to a commander.

The Marine Corps does not have a current definition of toxic leadership, which is a source of confusion and interpretation. A lack of Marine Corps definition within leadership doctrine creates confusion due to a lack of information on how to classify these individuals, and more importantly, how to deal with them. Moreover, absence of definition and guidance related to toxic leadership within doctrine, also creates room for interpretation by leaving it to each Marine to determine if a leader is in fact toxic or other (e.g. tough, demanding, high-strung.) Both confusion and interpretation create an environment where it becomes almost impossible to hold someone accountable. The U.S. Army defines a toxic leader as "a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. This leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others for getting what they want for themselves. The negative leader completes short-term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfill requests.”<sup>5</sup> This thesis will use the Army’s definition of toxic leadership and other services' descriptions, and apply it to the Marine Corps to demonstrate the requirement for a service specific definition that will facilitate the identification of these types of Marine leaders.

Captain Greg Stump, USCG, highlights some common characteristics displayed by a toxic individual in an article titled “Take On The Toxic Leader” that further assists building awareness and understanding: 1) The individual typically is an excellent manager or technician but has low emotional intelligence. They live by the checklist, both as a management tool and in leadership. 2) There is a gap between toxic leaders' self-assessments and the ratings provided by a majority of their direct reports. 3) Toxic leaders assume virtually no responsibility for a breakdown in relationships and the corrosive environment. 4) Toxic leaders rely on rank and titles versus performing the necessary work to establish strong relationships and lead selflessly. They do not understand that treating Marines with dignity and respect yields commitment. 5) Many toxic leaders present a persona that is the antithesis of their true self. They attempt to act like tyrants to achieve dominance, but in reality, they are afraid to fail.<sup>6</sup>

These definitions and characteristics provide a baseline understanding of what the military considers as a toxic leader, how a toxic leader behaves, and highlights how a toxic leader misuses mission accomplishment as an excuse to neglect and abuse his troops.

### **CAUSE OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP**

The common trend amongst the relieved commanders was an inability to discern that their actions were single-handedly eroding the unit's morale and effectiveness. Simply put, they were not aware that their efforts were toxic. In their mind, they were demanding to achieve the prescribed mission, and that meant everything. Dr. Reed describes this cause as a result of “lack of self-awareness.”<sup>7</sup>

***Lack of self-awareness*** – In the mind of a toxic leader, he or she is doing absolutely everything for the right reasons. In doing so, the toxic leader uses every means to accomplish the mission relative to his or her level of organization. Often, the leader's counter-productive

demands and unrealistic tasks contribute to the decline of troop welfare. Moreover, the toxic leader's mindset is to "kiss up while kick down,"<sup>8</sup> in other words, they were achieving small gains or results to look favorable to superiors while degrading the quality of the work environment for subordinates. If the commander had a sense of his or her emotional intelligence capabilities, perhaps the commander might have considered being more empathetic. Emotional Intelligence is defined as "the ability to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thoughts."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the commander could have benefitted from differentiating between the external and internal pressures towards the mission. Simply put, establishing priorities vice making everything a priority, hence unrealistic goals. In doing so, the commander could have been able to achieve a balance where the troops would accomplish the mission without the necessity of creating a hostile and toxic environment.

### **EXAMPLES OF TRAITS / BEHAVIOR**

This section will provide examples that are meant to illustrate the general behaviors of toxic leaders. It is essential to keep in mind that toxicity is applied in a spectrum. For example, a toxic leader can range from creating counter-productive environments to using disparaging racial and gender comments towards members of a unit. The examples provided are broken into common traits with their associated behaviors that toxic leaders generally demonstrated based on the articles available within open source reporting.

***Ignoring feedback*** – In this example, the toxic leader was unwilling and unable to refrain from being confrontational during open discussions.<sup>10</sup> The dialogue was strictly one-way, further degrading the flow of communication. Ultimately, the input provided to the commander, pertaining to mission related issues, were not taken into consideration. Lastly, the toxic leader

did not welcome constructive criticism and recommendations from his staff and subordinate commanders. This environment stifled initiative and creativity.

***Zero Defect / High Standards*** –In this particular example, a member of the staff attempted to approach the commander and make him or her aware of current command climate issues within the unit, unfortunately, the warning was ignored. According to the *Marine Corps Times* article, a staff member wrote an email to the commander stating, "The staff often avoids presenting you with bad news because they fear your reaction. Instead of absorbing bad news and providing guidance for a solution, the perception amongst the officers and [staff noncommissioned officers] is that you immediately look to lay blame on someone."<sup>11</sup> The overall mood within the unit was that unless it was good news, the commander did not want to hear it. The commander demanded excellence at all costs and was not willing to compromise.

***Always Wrong*** – In this case, the toxic leader creates an environment where the mission is everything.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in a redacted command investigation, the toxic leader justifies his or her drive and abusive behavior by saying "I could change the perception...and culture in the battalion by setting the example, holding ourselves accountable first, and being firm but fair."<sup>13</sup> In some cases, the commander's approach towards change was perceived as innovative. However, in practice, every example of failing to meet the new standards is seen as a failure on the subordinate commanders and staff. The commander amplifies the feeling of always being wrong by making the subordinate commanders aware of their failure via public humiliation. The toxic leader justifies the actions taken as being strict but not abusive, and necessary to demonstrate the importance of the goals set. Moreover, the subordinate leaders and staff's efforts to accomplish the toxic leaders' goals are considered inadequate. Ultimately, subordinate leaders and staff feel they cannot do anything right to please the toxic leader, and the overall desire to

perform decreases as well as the unit's effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> The commander blamed his staff and subordinate commanders for being too emotional when confronted by investigators.<sup>15</sup>

***Counter-productivity (busy work)*** – This is the example of the commander micro-managing all unit activities within a unit due to lack of trust in subordinates, and creates internal roadblocks in the form of counter-productive projects that divert focus from the mission. Overworking personnel to no end significantly impacts morale and work ethic. An investigation to this particular commander revealed a written statement by an Equal Opportunity Officer stating, "I have never seen or heard of a Marine Corps command so broken and climate so hostile, the mental health of the members is at a dangerous level and if unchanged could result in heightened incidents to loss of life."<sup>16</sup> One tends to overlook the importance of troop welfare when striving to accomplish the mission. In this example, extremely overworked Marines resulted in a hostile work environment where loss of life of a member of the unit was considered a potential outcome.

***Verbal Abuse*** – In this example, over 27 witnesses reported that the commander regularly used "demeaning language against African Americans, Mexicans, Asians, Samoans, and others."<sup>17</sup> The findings of the investigating officer concluded with the following statement, "The Marines and sailors deserve to be treated fairly with dignity and respect and must be allowed to work in an environment free of unlawful, offensive and discriminatory behavior"<sup>18</sup> This example furthers the understanding that toxic leadership falls within a spectrum that ranges from non-verbal (non-mission related task saturation, lack of trust) to verbal (berating, racial/gender comments) abuse.

## **EFFECTS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP**

This section ties effects to the examples provided in the previous section. The effects are: Fear, Decreased Communication, Decreased Initiative, Decreased Command Climate, Decreased Faith in the Institution, and Leaving the Marine Corps. Toxic leadership can have a myriad of effects within a unit, but for this thesis, the effects mentioned earlier were synthesized from the open source literature regarding relieved commanders on the basis of command climate issues.

***Fear*** – Toxic leaders create a working environment where Marines work in fear. Marines fear being ridiculed in public, fear of taking risks, fear of making decisions, and fear of getting fired. Excerpts from a command investigation included the interview of two Marines stating that it was the worst command they had ever served. Another Marine told the investigating officer, “Every day I came to work was the day I was going to be fired.”<sup>19</sup> The fear expressed by the Marines directly contributed to a lack of troop welfare by the commander, which in turn, degraded that unit’s ability to accomplish the mission.

***Decreased Communication*** – Often a toxic leader creates communication barriers that no one within the command can penetrate. An open source report provides an example of communication barriers through a statement provided by the relieved commander, “My ability to command and ensure good order and discipline had been consistently undermined by Company Commanders and Staff.”<sup>20</sup> In the end, the toxic leader avoided having conversations concerning essential matters relating to the unit's mission and readiness. The decrease in communication leads to a growing perception of a lack of trust by the commander. As the examples highlighted in the previous section, a toxic leader is unlikely going to admit he or she is wrong. Therefore, subordinate commanders and staff will become more reluctant to provide feedback. As simple as it may seem, treating subordinate commanders and staff with dignity and respect creates an

environment where active dialogue contributes to mission accomplishment. A toxic leader has significant difficulty compromising. The commander fears being perceived as weak or incompetent when in reality he or she would be seen as humble.

***Decreased Initiative*** – When a commander assigns counter-productive tasks that are not directly tied to the mission, a Marine will gradually question the relevance of the task. Marines feel undervalued and underappreciated in this environment. When taken to an extreme, productivity within a unit suffers. The commander creates an environment where initiative and innovation is not encouraged. Furthermore, the situation often created resentment towards the establishment and question the future potential of long-term employment within the institution.

***Negative Command Climate*** – Toxic leaders can create a hostile work environment that can subsequently generate a sense of hopelessness. Furthermore, a lack of emotional intelligence degrades the commander's ability to be more empathetic towards his Marines. Lack of empathy creates a divide within the unit that erodes the climate, making troop welfare secondary to mission accomplishment. The stress and mental abuse caused by the negative command climate transform into loss of confidence in the organization. The effects are closely linked and generated as a result of continued abuse without repercussions.

***Decreased Faith in the Institution*** – Those who serve under toxic leaders end up resenting the organization and the procedures that allowed for that leader to assume a position of authority. The resentment can be amplified the lower a Marine is within the chain of command. Dr. Reed and LTC (Ret.) Olsen stated in a *Military Review* article that by asking "military officers and noncommissioned officers if they would leave the profession of arms because of the way a supervisor treated them, and, depending on their time in service, anywhere from a third to

all of them will say yes."<sup>21</sup> It is a significant problem when talented Marines get out of the Marine Corps because of negative experiences with toxic leaders.

***Leaving the Marine Corps*** – Finally, the “survivors,” a term used by Dr. Reed in his book *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, of a toxic leader lose all hope when the system does not recognize and acknowledge that the leader is toxic and allow him or her to continue to command. If the commander is not relieved due to command climate reasons, the system instead rewards the toxic leader with promotion and future opportunities to pursue his or her career progression. This problem highlights how the institution not only tolerates toxic leaders but produces and sustains them.<sup>22</sup> Depending on the ranks of the survivors and how much time they have invested in the Marine Corps, some survivors will see it as a sign to get out, and the rest will stay in with the hopes of never serving under that leader again.

In summary, this section exposed some of the effects of toxic leadership. The linkage between the cause, and the demonstrated traits and behaviors correlate to the effects mentioned. The overall lack of self-awareness, blinded by a deep desire to accomplish the mission, did not allow for the toxic leader to see the impact of his or her toxicity to the unit and Marines.

### **MARINE CORPS LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY**

According to Richard M. Swain, author of the *Armed Forces Officer*, the Marine Corps’ leadership development model “follows a more traditional pattern of instruction-through-emulation.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, leadership is the foundation of a Marine Corps Officer, and it requires development through training, education, and experience. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, narrows it even further by emphasizing leadership development through professional military education and training. MCDP-1 states, “From the initial stages of leadership training, a leader’s career should be viewed as a continuous, progressive process of



development. At each stage, a Marine should be preparing for the subsequent stage.”<sup>24</sup>

Understanding that not every leader will be able to attain combat leadership experience and that training only develops a technical aspect of leadership; the Marine Corps utilizes education as a means to create a well-rounded leader. In doing so, doctrine informs and frames the direction of professional military education that drives leader development.

In 2005, the publication titled *Leading Marines* encapsulated the Marine Corps leadership philosophy. The publication provides the leadership framework set forth by Marine Corps Order (MCO) 29 published 14 August 1920 by Major General John A. Lejeune. MCO 29 states that the relationship between the leader and led should represent the relationship of a teacher and a scholar. Future Marine Corps leaders are required to read *Leading Marines* before attending Officer Candidate School to gain an appreciation of the fundamentals of leadership and to develop a stronger foundation to face the moral challenges that lie ahead. As an indoctrination and sustainment tool, *Leading Marines* effectively articulates the fundamentals of leadership and depicting “what right looks like.” However, it does not adequately address the complexities of a toxic leader or define what wrong leadership looks like.

Based on Marine Corps leadership philosophy, doctrine states that leader development needs to be a career-long endeavor for officers to continue to refine their craft. Moreover, it stresses how doctrine informs and frames the direction of the Marine Corps. Analyzing these two important points and overlaying them over the toxic leadership problem, one can infer two potential outcomes or solutions. First, updating the leadership doctrine to include toxic leadership to inform and frame leader development. Second, creating toxic leadership awareness through leadership development through a career-long education continuum.

## **CURRENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM**

The Marine Corps conducts leadership development through formal resident and non-resident professional military education (PME). The officer leadership development continuum builds upon the foundation established in Officer Candidate School (OCS). OCS emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and character development in preparation to lead others. Marine Corps leadership fundamentals and principles are paramount to the officer candidate. OCS supplements doctrine with case studies by focusing on examples of great leaders and their ability to overcome adversity. The examples of Chesty Puller, John A. Lejeune, and Smedley Butler serve as the gold standard of leadership for officer candidates.

Conversely, the Marine Corps rarely emphasize negative leadership examples and their effects on units and subordinates. The focus is on showing officer candidates how a good leader acts, therefore, lacking a balance of instruction that is critical in the development of young leaders. Upon completion of OCS, the Marine Corps standard is to have a physically and mentally fit leader with the foundational knowledge to begin a career-long endeavor of leadership development through training, experience, and education. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps misses an opportunity to address what wrong type of leadership looks like, so that officer candidates establish a baseline of what not to do. Starting early and creating a leadership balance where an officer candidate knows what a good and bad leader looks like, serves as strong foundation to begin a career-long endeavor of leadership development.

The next level of PME is The Basic School (TBS). TBS is primarily a leadership school designed around the idea that every officer, regardless of job, is a provisional rifle platoon commander first. This idea creates a sense of purpose; to become the best leader one can be, based on the potential responsibility to lead Marines in combat. TBS curriculum focuses on five

horizontal themes: a) a man or woman of exemplary character; b) devoted to leading Marines 24/7; c) able to decide, communicate, and act in the fog of war; d) a warfighter who embraces the Corps' warrior ethos; e) mentally strong and physically tough. These themes set a standard for character development that is considered the foundation of leadership.<sup>25</sup> TBS' horizontal themes aim at developing the character within a leader. TBS does this through its courses focused on ethics.

Ethics 1 focuses on how an individual, a particular situation, and sometimes the system can impact decision-making. Moreover, Ethics 1 is meant to develop an understanding of leaders' limitations that factor in during decision-making. The student handout provided the Darley and Batson experiment as an example that explained how time, mission focus, and expectations from higher could develop perceptual blindness. The experiment resulted in the leader fixating on the problem to the point where other variables were ignored or not accounted for.<sup>26</sup> The Stanford Prison Experiment is used to illustrate how good people placed in a position of authority, within a chaotic system, can resort to toxic behavior. Although useful case studies to determine ethical and unethical behavior, both case studies do not facilitate a discussion on the subject of toxic leadership. A commander that is unethical does not necessarily make him or her toxic and vice-a-versa. Finally, Ethics 1 concludes with stressing the importance of the system. The system expects officers to lead by example and to uphold standards.

Ethics 2 focuses on My Lai and Haditha case studies as a way to discuss battlefield ethics. The student handbook proposes that if a leader does his or her job in creating an appropriate command climate where discipline, responsibility, and good judgment define the unit, the Marines and Sailors will endure the morally corrosive effects of combat and continue to fight with success and pride.<sup>27</sup> While Ethics 1 and 2 provide insight on the importance of being

an ethical leader with sound morals that drive decision-making, and how it applies to battlefield situations, the Ethics curriculum does not address the effects of toxic leadership.

Overall, TBS continues the leadership continuum by pursuing the development of character through ethics as the foundation of leadership. Ethics 1 highlights how the pressure of mission accomplishment results in perceptual blindness but does not provide the linkage to toxic leadership. Ethics 1 also attempts to use a civilian example to demonstrate how good people with good intentions can show toxic behavior but does not relate it to the military. In both attempts, Ethics 1 falls short by not examining poor military leadership examples related to a garrison environment. An officer is likelier to experience moral and ethical dilemmas in garrison before even entering the battlefield. Focusing on characteristics of poor leadership styles, how corrosive leaders can affect a unit's climate, and how these toxic leaders degrade a unit's readiness and lethality ought to be part of the lesson. It is also essential to make the distinction between toxic and unethical. These are two separate and distinct leadership challenges that need to be addressed individually and with their individual vignettes. Making this information available to Marine leaders early and often will increase the overall awareness of what toxic behavior looks like within the institution.

As a Marine Corps officer continues to advance, the next level of PME is Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS). The timing of EWS is key in a Marine Corps officer's career. EWS is the school that prepares officers before assuming company command. EWS's approach to leadership is through a Profession of Arms course that focuses on the importance of leadership styles, the difference in personalities types, how to develop organizations, critical thinking and decision making. EWS also ties in the Profession of Arms lessons with ethical battlefield case

studies meant to evaluate leader actions, determine how the leader came to make a decision, and reflect on whether the decision made was the correct one.

Although necessary for an officer to understand how a leader can make good and poor decisions based on the circumstances, EWS continues the trend of solely focusing on battlefield vice garrison examples. A toxic leader will consistently make decisions with total disregard of members within the unit, treat personnel with lack of respect, and create an environment of hopelessness, thus deteriorating the climate of the unit while in garrison and magnifying during deployments. Studying cases of past-relieved commanders due to "command climate" reasons gives Marine leaders examples of poor leaderships. This process will help develop leaders holistically and create a balance of instruction. Creating awareness in future company commanders as they prepare to increase their span of influence and control over Marines is an investment the Marine Corps needs to make.

Command and Staff College (CSC) provides Majors with the Profession of Arms course that reinforces professional ethics, moral development, and decision-making. According to the Command & Staff Annual Year 18/19 course description, the course is meant to “develop and refine the student’s ability to provide ethical and effective leadership to large organizations by studying and applying the concept of professional ethics, moral development and decision making, the principles of organizational behavior, and leadership in a variety of contexts and operational environments, with a focus on leading change.”<sup>28</sup> However, informal leadership discussions allow for the conversation on toxic leadership to occur as a way to augment the current instruction. CSC appears to be the turning point where leadership tends to decline in priority. The emphasis on a comprehensive understanding of planning, war studies, and history supersede leadership. Of note, the leadership course does provide case studies, Rakkasans and

3/2 Snipers, which have some characteristics of toxic leadership that originated in garrison and amplified during the deployment and resulted in unethical actions. Moreover, the student led classes under the Leading Analysis – 2161 lesson provide another opportunity to address aspects of toxicity exhibited by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur “Bud” Holland through the Czar-52 case study. However, the absence of a dedicated toxic leadership lesson within CSC continues to be a missed opportunity for leader development. Including a toxic leadership lecture, followed by seminar discussions will ensure that all students receive exposure to this problem, and further increase the awareness of toxic leaders.

The Marine Corps War (MCWAR) College MCWAR primarily focuses on strategic leadership. Strategic leadership is the “application of strategic thinking skills to assess and creatively address the challenges strategic leaders must face to include managing and changing the organizational culture, leading the profession, establishing a positive command climate within the senior leadership team, and making strategic ethical decisions.”<sup>29</sup> Although MCWAR equips senior leaders with the tools to be an effective leader, it appears the emphasis on leadership continues to decrease in priority. MCWAR attendees are post-command Lieutenant Colonels that have served in the Marine Corps between 17-19 years. The inclination is that these leaders have a solid leadership foundation; otherwise they would have not made it this far. However, as previously mentioned, leadership development must remain high in priority and continue to be development throughout the officer’s career. More importantly, the more an officer advances, the more influence he or she will have over a greater number of Marines. It is imperative that the basic tenets and fundamentals of leadership, to include what a right and wrong leader looks like, are stressed within MCWAR.

Finally, the Cornerstone Seminar for newly selected O-5 and O-6 commanders does a thorough job exploring various aspects of leadership. Cornerstone is a 10-day seminar that prepares Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels, senior enlisted leaders, and their families for the demanding task of command. During Cornerstone, the officers receive a period of instruction on Toxic Leadership; the first time in an officer's career to obtain a deliberate two-hour period of instruction on the dangers of toxic leaders. Similar to MCWAR, by this point, the students of Cornerstone have gone through two to three levels of command where they could have been more informed on the subject of toxic leadership and be better prepared to address the effects of a toxic environment. When it comes to training and education, exposure and repetition are vital to ensuring that the lesson resonates in the students. In the case of Cornerstone, the officers are accustomed to their leadership style and the way of conducting business. Timing and frequency of exposure is critical to the development of leaders, and especially to understand the issue of toxic leadership.

In summation, Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership* provides the only definition within DoD of toxic leadership. Based on the definition, the toxic leadership cause, the behaviors demonstrated by the relieved Marine commanders, and the overall effects to the institution, the thesis supports that the Marine Corps has had problems selecting toxic leaders for command. The examples provided illustrate how toxic leaders deteriorate a unit's climate and degrade its performance. Also, the review of the Marine Corps Leadership Philosophy shows how doctrine supports and expects leadership development to take place. Finally, the study of current leader development lessons of each officer PME school was meant to identify the extent of emphasis on the subject of toxic leadership while identifying gaps between what senior leaders are taught compared to junior leaders.

## ORGANIZATIONAL SHORTFALLS

This thesis has established that Marine Corps PME, and to some extent training, does not adequately provide awareness on the topic of toxic leadership; however, there are other organizational shortfalls that have allowed for toxic leaders to exist and in some cases thrive within the Marine Corps. This section will briefly touch upon culture, the evaluation system, and the continued enabling of toxic leaders by “protectors,” as factors within the organization that allow for toxic leaders to exist. These factors or shortfalls require extensive exploration to fully understand the root enabling characteristics that contribute to toxicity. For the purpose of this thesis, these factors are meant to emphasize the increasing need for toxic leadership lessons to be included within PME to create awareness and understanding.

***Culture*** – Marine Corps culture is built around winning battles that emphasize duty, moral responsibility and obligation to accomplish the mission.<sup>30</sup> The Marine Corps summarizes this notion up in two principles: mission accomplishment and troop welfare. The high expectations of yielding results create the perfect environment for toxic leaders to thrive. As covered in the last section, Marine Corps PME does an excellent job addressing case studies related to ethical dilemmas within combat-related environments. The emphasis of combat-related case studies is aligned with the combat mindset and culture within the Marine Corps. However, a leader must also think, decide, and act during garrison related problem sets. Moreover, a leader must apply the right balance to ensure mission accomplishment and troop welfare are mutually supporting each other.

A leader achieves this balance through awareness. Marine Corps leader development needs to include case studies of garrison related toxic leadership challenges to be part of PME. Unfortunately, due to the Marine Corps level of awareness on the issue of toxic leadership, it is



difficult to hold a toxic leader accountable properly. Army Chaplain (Colonel) Kenneth Williams suggests in his article “Toxic Culture: Enabling Incivility in the U.S. Military and What to Do About It”, featured in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, that within the Department of Defense as a whole “an organization does not know how to deal with a toxic person and either reassigns or isolates and reallocates the toxic person’s responsibilities to other, already overworked personnel.”<sup>31</sup> Instead, victims of the toxic leader are moved to other organizations in an attempt to control the situation without holding the toxic leader accountable, thus allowing the cycle of abuse to continue.<sup>32</sup>

**Evaluation System** – Another organizational shortfall is the officer evaluation system within the Marine Corps, known as the fitness report, does not correctly account for character. COL Williams argues that evaluations are merely the ends that facilitate getting results and being promoted to justify the toxic means. Further highlighting a problem within the organizational culture of zero-defects that foster a highly competitive promotion system. COL Williams concludes by stating that any “marginally negative entry could influence selection, resulting in values becoming an affirmative, literal ‘check the block’ on evaluations.”<sup>33</sup> The result is further reinforcement of toxic behavior through selection and promotion of toxic leaders.

**Protectors** – As stated earlier, not every leader will be able to attain combat leadership experience first hand. The lack of combat experience is often mitigated through shared experiences from peers or superiors. Often, junior officers are taken under the tutelage of a mentor who is usually a senior, more experienced officer. Author Robert Coram writes in the biographical book titled, *Brute: The Life of Victor Krulak, U.S. Marine*, “Krulak now found himself in the enviable position of having a high-ranking mentor – what Marines called a ‘sea daddy,’” to describe the relationship between Krulak and General Holland M. Smith. Regardless

of the terminology, senior leaders feel an obligation to take young officers that display potential under their care to pass along knowledge and experience for the betterment of the organization.

Unfortunately, the relationship fostered between a mentor and a mentee can create a sense of protection for a toxic mentee. Dr. Reed states, “toxic leaders are agile operators and organizational chameleons who skillfully harness systems of power.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, toxic leaders know how the system works, and they understand how to circumvent it to achieve their individualistic goals. Dr. Reed goes on by stating that toxic leaders “are capable of masking their toxicity and fostering special relationships with powerful protectors; they are careful about discerning those they can abuse from those they must be nice to.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, toxic leaders are capable of achieving short-term wins to please their commander/mentor and create the illusion of a successful unit. The successes are well received despite indicators of a subpar command climate. COL Williams calls this a “subtle quid pro quo,” based on either the relationship between the protector and the toxic leader or the protector benefitting from the apparent high performance. Finally, shock and disbelief of the fact that someone that appeared so dedicated could be accused of being malevolent towards others.<sup>36</sup> In the end, authorities that can take action against a toxic leader have a difficult time due to protectors prolonging the situation by enabling and making excuses for the toxic leader's actions.

The tradition of sharing experiences through mentorship is not the problem; the lack of awareness of a toxic leaders' way of operating within the institution is the fundamental problem. A toxic leader's self-centered attitude and insatiable hunger to get promoted makes senior, influential officers, a prime target as a potential protector. General Lejeune stated in Marine Corps Order 29, “The relation between officers and enlisted men should...partake of the nature of the relation between father and son.”<sup>37</sup> This same approach should be considered in the case of

junior and senior officers to develop a sense of accountability, and correct toxic leaders.

However, it all begins by creating awareness throughout the institution.

All of these factors have negative impacts on the organization and do not adequately address the problem. Early detection through awareness is vital to inform leaders on the issue of toxic leadership. Ensuring future leaders understand that humility, respect, and trust towards subordinates enable mission accomplishment is integral to achieving the right balance between mission accomplishment and troop welfare.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

The next section focuses on two recommendations that are meant to increase awareness towards the issue of toxic leadership. It is important to understand that the recommendations provided will not solve the problem. The recommendations are meant to set conditions for institutional, vice informal and indirect, awareness. Updating Marine Corps leadership doctrine to include a toxic leadership definition will demonstrate the organization's zeal by acknowledging that toxic leaders exist within the institution, and by providing a way ahead towards addressing toxic behavior. Awareness will also be provided through the current leadership periods of instruction already taking place within entry level and PME schools. The awareness will be achieved through the implementation of relevant, non-combat, case studies (e.g., redacted command investigations of relieved commanders due to command climate reasons.)

***Doctrine*** – Marine Corps doctrine provides the foundation for planning, decisions, and ultimately actions. When something is in doctrine, it is likelier to be considered and followed. The U.S Army has identified that toxic leadership is such a grave matter that it has included a definition within its *Army Leadership*, ADP 6-22. The guidance within ADP 6-22 also highlights

the effects a toxic leadership can have on a unit and on the mission. What it does not do is clearly articulate how to deal with a toxic leader. Marine Corps doctrine must account for toxicity within the ranks. The inclusion of toxic leadership verbiage, definition, and measures to take against toxic behavior or a toxic leader will increase awareness, clarity, and ultimately accountability. The information included in doctrine will ultimately inform and frame leadership training and education.

***PME: What Wrong Looks Like*** – Depending on the level of school, the leadership block focuses on leadership development aspects that build upon each other, as previously addressed. As an example of how to seamlessly add toxic leadership within PME is by leveraging current lessons such as group dynamics. Group dynamics is meant to highlight the various personality types that exist to inform leaders on how to leverage Marines' strengths and understand their weaknesses. Understanding group dynamics facilitate the discussion that leads to organizational culture and design, and ultimately organizational change. This lesson does an adequate job explaining why people behave the way they do and how they see the world. Simply adding real-world examples or case studies that can help reinforce the importance of being able to manage an organization will augment the instruction by tying in toxic behavior and its effects on the organization.

Moreover, it is the responsibility of a commander to ensure that his or her command climate is healthy. A good command climate is indicative of a healthy unit that thrives on respect, discipline, and readiness. Conversely, a poor command climate indicates underlying issues within a unit that erode a unit's effectiveness. Another example where adding toxic leadership within the lesson could be simply made is within the organizational change lesson. Adding relevant case studies that focus on past-relieved commanders due to a "poor command

climate” will provide redacted command investigations to students that address how the situation went bad for that particular commander, and reinforce the topics already being taught. The Marine Corps puts much emphasis on lessons learned, what better way to educate future leaders than by providing them a real example of what wrong looks like. These types of case studies may also provide a period of individual reflection given the nature of the case study. As previously stated, toxic leaders tend to breed other toxic leaders through the example they set. The recommended implementation of case studies will unearth toxic behavior that will feed the dialogue and ultimately increase awareness.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this thesis was not to solve the problem of toxic leadership but to raise awareness on the issue. Marine Corps culture provides fertile ground for toxic leaders to exist and thrive. Therefore, creating awareness will ensure that officers are better equipped to recognize the behavior and indicators of toxic leaders. If nothing else, showing impressionable leaders what wrong leadership looks like will serve as another means of developing self-aware leaders. However, creating institutional awareness will not be possible unless Marine Corps leadership doctrine is updated to include a toxic leadership definition, and guidance to deal with these types of destructive leaders. The Marine Corps recognizes the value of the individual Marine. Technology and equipment alone do not win battles; the individual Marine does. Marines do not get to choose who leads them; therefore, the Marine Corps must ensure that the leader it places at the head of the formation has been ruthlessly trained, educated, and vetted – the Marine Corps owes them that much.

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<sup>1</sup> Open source research was conducted strictly on commanding officers relieved due to “command climate” related incidents. The news articles reviewed provided excerpts of command investigations. The excerpts stated the reason of relief as being “toxic” in nature.

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “politically correct.”

<sup>3</sup> Marine Corps Recruit Depot. *Command Investigation into the Circumstances Surrounding Alleged Abuse of Authority by the “Redacted,” 4th Recruit Training Battalion, Marine Corps Recruit Depot (South Carolina, June 25, 2015)*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army. *Army Leadership ADP 6-22* (Washington, D.C.; Headquarters Department of the Army, 2012), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Stump, *Take on the Toxic Leader*, Vol. 143, (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 2017), 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>9</sup> P. Salovey and J.D. Mayer, *Emotional Intelligence*, (Amytville, NY: Baywood Publishing Co., 1990)

<sup>10</sup> Marine Corps Recruit Depot. *Command Investigation into the Circumstances Surrounding Alleged Abuse of Authority by the “Redacted,” 4th Recruit Training Battalion, Marine Corps Recruit Depot (South Carolina, June 25, 2015)*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2016/11/29/crush-their-nuts-marines-determine-working-for-this-commander-was-pure-hell/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Marine Corps Recruit Depot. *Command Investigation into the Circumstances Surrounding Alleged Abuse of Authority by the “Redacted,” 4th Recruit Training Battalion, Marine Corps Recruit Depot (South Carolina, June 25, 2015)*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2017/12/18/fired-colonel-was-like-an-abusive-spouse-witness-says/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>21</sup> George E. Reed and Richard A. Olsen, *Toxic Leadership: Part Deux*, (2010), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Richard M. Swain and Albert C. Pierce, *The Armed Forces Officer* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2017), 64.

<sup>24</sup> Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Warfighting MCDP-1* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1991), 61-62.

<sup>25</sup> David R. Everly, "The Responsibility of Developing Character," Volume 102 (Marine Corps Gazette, November, 2018), 10.

<sup>26</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Ethics I and 2 Student Handout* (The Basic School), 9.

<sup>27</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Ethics I and 2 Student Handout* (The Basic School), 10.

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<sup>28</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Leadership in the Profession of Arms I*, Command and Staff College Annual Year 18/19 Course Description.

<sup>29</sup> United States War College. *Academics Programs Guide – Academic Year 2019*. 25.

<sup>30</sup> George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 27.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Williams, *Toxic Culture*, (Washington: National Defense University, 2017), 59.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 49.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Williams, *Toxic Culture*, (Washington: National Defense University, 2017), 58.

<sup>37</sup> Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Relationships Between Officers and Men [and Women]*, MCO 29, August 14, 1920.

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