

TIGER MIKE AND THE TOXIC TRIANGLE



The concept of leadership has traditionally been discussed in positive, constructive terms; however, the focus has increasingly (and some would argue necessarily) shifted toward the darker aspects that have resulted in bankruptcies, corruption, and scandal for so many organizations. Fallout in some of the world's top organizations might come as news to the uninitiated, but it's no surprise to those in the inner circles who have become all too familiar with destructive leadership.

This cycle of destructive leadership churns aggressively within an organization and creates a perfect storm amongst leader, follower and environmental factors that converge to form the Toxic Triangle.

To illustrate the Toxic Triangle and the symptoms and implications of destructive leadership in the workplace, look no further than the real-life interoffice memos composed by former Houston oilman Edward Mike "Tiger Mike" Davis.

The full text of these memos has been circulating online as an outrageous, but real example of destructive leadership; the tone in which Tiger Mike addresses his employees is so painfully insensitive and belligerent as to seem like satire. Unfortunately, there is enough first-person anecdotal evidence floating around the internet to suggest that Tiger Mike was every bit the "known son-of-a-bitch" he claims to be in his communiqués, and it is through his writings that some textbook examples of destructive leadership tendencies are revealed.

Defining Destructive Leadership

Because there are so many potential factors at play, constructing a clear picture of destructive leadership has traditionally been difficult. It's safe to say, however, that destructive leadership tendencies begin at the personal level and if left unchecked can grow into a malignancy that can and will destroy entire organizations. Dark side leader personalities are usually associated with positive effects, at least in the short term. It is the long-term ramifications that prompt the destructive label.

In studying the characteristics of these behaviors, also known as derailers, Hogan Assessment Systems developed an 11-scale measure of potentially harmful behavioral tendencies called the Hogan Development Survey (HDS). The science behind the HDS shows that derailers directly impact an individual's leadership style and are most evident in stressful and highly-charged circumstances, which in Tiger Mike's case seem to be most of the time. Consider the following passages:

What the employees of Tiger Oil International, Inc. do is none of your business! You work for Tiger Oil Company or Tiger Drilling Company when it comes to employment procedures or anything else. Tiger Oil International is a separate company and wholly run as a separate company.

Handwriting takes much longer than a typewriter -- you're wasting your time, but more importantly, you're wasting my time. If you don't know how to type, you'd better learn.

Idle conversation and gossip in this office among employees will result in immediate termination.

Don't talk about other people and other things in this office.

DO YOUR JOBS AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!

The confrontational tone in these excerpts suggests that Tiger Mike is very high on the HDS Excitable scale, meaning that he was moody, easily irritated, difficult to please and emotionally volatile. Additionally, Tiger Mike shows an elevated HDS Colorful score, which explains his penchant for being dramatic, disruptive and attention-seeking.

Independent of the personal problems that arise from these sorts of behaviors, the organizational implications of destructive leadership can be much more far-reaching. In an effort to exert authority and influence over their followers (i.e. employees), destructive leaders can cause widespread suffering and overall instability amongst the workforce.

The Toxic Triangle: Characteristics of Destructive Leaders

The concept of the Toxic Triangle was originally outlined by Art Padilla, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser in their 2007 whitepaper *The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments*.

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's research shows that destructive leadership is made up of five critical factors: charisma; personalized need for power; narcissism; negative life themes, and an ideology of hate. While some of these terms might seem a bit severe in regard to Tiger Mike, the fundamental concepts of each are evident throughout his writings.

Charisma

While not all charismatic leadership is destructive, the most exploitive leadership contains an element of charisma that generates an air of authority.

Consider the following excerpt from Tiger Mike's memo of February 10th, 1978:

We are going to do it the way I want it done. If you have a suggestion on how we can improve our methods, your suggestions are more than welcome. The best way to submit a suggestion is to put it in writing, sign your name, and send it to me by registered mail -- then you can't say it got lost. I DON'T WANT ANY EXCUSES.

Personalized Need for Power

Good leaders use their influence to improve the lives of others, while destructive leaders use their positions for personal gain and self-service. This desire to control every aspect of operations can take the form of appealing to follower needs for protection, security, or inclusion. In the case of our friend Tiger Mike, the need for power can also be conveyed via overt demands for loyalty, and threats of termination for those who disagree:

Any employee who does not want to adhere to the items mentioned above can quit. If any of you think I will go out of business because I can't hire help, get out, and I will hire the people to do the work. I don't need a job - you people are the ones who need to get with it.

Narcissism

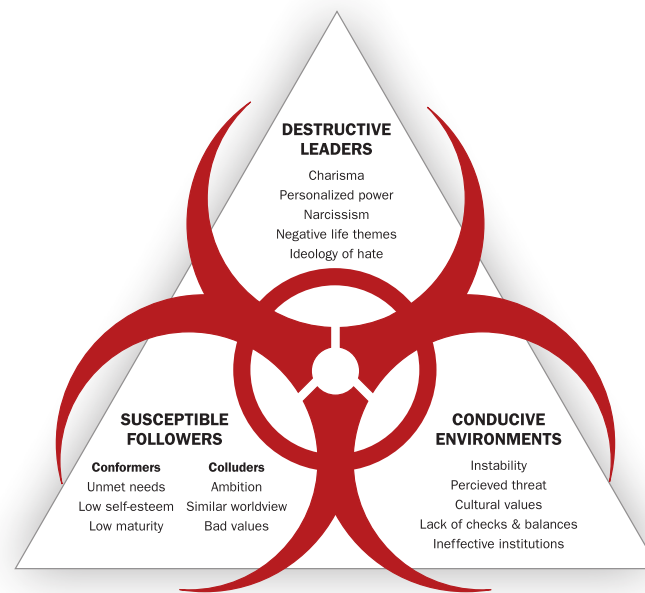
The research conducted by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser describes narcissism as being "closely related to charisma and the personalized need for power." Narcissistic leaders often exhibit dominance, arrogance, and entitlement to demand an unquestioning adherence to company rules and policies.

If I don't pay you enough money to do these things you want to do personally, then I suggest you ask for a raise or quit and get another job.

Don't take advantage of me, because I am going to be looking down your throat. You need the job -- I don't!

Do not speak to me when you see me. If I want to speak to you, I will do so. I want to save my throat. I don't want to ruin it by saying hello to all of you sons-of-bitches.

THE TOXIC TRIANGLE



Negative life themes

Personality research shows that destructive leaders aren't born that way; rather they develop those tendencies through reaction and adaptation to life events that sometimes occur even in early childhood. Traumatic circumstances like disruptive or abusive family life, poverty, and lack of education are shown to be catalysts for abusive or exploitive behaviors in adults.

While little is known about Tiger Mike's childhood, it's reported that he was born in Lebanon and immigrated to the United States as a young boy. Lacking any formal education, he began a career as a taxi driver in Denver, before being hired as a chauffeur for a wealthy Denver socialite and marrying her after she was widowed. Tiger Mike used the money he gained in the divorce settlement to fund his oil drilling prospects, eventually founding Tiger Drilling in Houston where the example memos cited here were generated.

It's plausible that Tiger Mike's demeanor was the result of being driven initially to overcome childhood adversity, followed by an overwhelming position to maintain his newfound station in life.

Ideology of Hate

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's research also shows that hatefulness is a "key component" of destructive leadership tendencies, and that hate helps to legitimize the use (or threat of) of violence, retribution and intimidation. In the case of Tiger Mike, he makes

a point of singling out certain societal elements, describing their inferiority, and justifying his viewpoint in the rather ironic assertion that “cleanliness is next to godliness:”

Anyone who lets their hair grow below their ears to where I can't see their ears means they don't wash. If they don't wash, they stink, and if they stink, I don't want the son-of-a-bitch around me.

The Toxic Triangle: Susceptible Followers

Why are certain followers unable or unwilling to resist domineering and abusive leaders? Perhaps they need safety, security, group membership, and predictability in an uncertain world.

Some followers actually benefit from destructive activities, and end up contributing to the toxic vision of the leader:

Fred Addison will inspect each rig at least once a week and not tell the toolpusher when he is coming

All groups have basic needs for social order, cohesion, identity, and the coordination of collective activity, and these needs are combined with a natural tendency for people to obey authority figures, imitate higher-status individuals, and conform to the culture of the group.

There are generally two groups of followers: conformers and colluders. Conformers comply with destructive leaders out of fear, while colluders actively participate in a destructive leader's agenda. Both types are motivated by self-interest, but their concerns are different. Conformers try to minimize the consequences of not while colluders seek personal gain through association with a destructive leader. The vulnerability of conformers is based on unmet basic needs, negative self-evaluations, and psychological immaturity. In contrast, colluders are ambitious, selfish and share the destructive leader's worldviews.

Self-esteem concerns the basic appraisal people make of their overall value as human beings. Low self-esteem distinguishes followers from leaders, in that individuals with low self-esteem often wish to be someone more desirable, which prompts them to identify with charismatic leaders. Research also suggests that people with low self-esteem are more likely to follow a controlling and manipulative leader because the follower feels they deserve such treatment.

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's research also describes the concepts of self-efficacy, which refers to beliefs about personal capability to perform well, affecting decisions about what activities to undertake and how much effort to spend on them. Locus of control concerns the belief in self-determined fate versus the belief that external factors are governed by external factors. People with

an external locus of control tend to not see themselves as leaders, making them easier to manipulate and naturally attracted to others who seem powerful and willing to care for them.

It stands to reason, then, that people with low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and an external locus of control are most susceptible to destructive leaders.

The Toxic Triangle: Conducive environments

The third element of the Toxic Triangle concerns the environment that surrounds leaders, followers, and their interactions. Most leadership scholars recognize that the “situation” matters. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's review suggests that four environmental factors are critical factors in destructive leadership: instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and absence of checks and balances and institutionalization.

Instability

During times of instability, leaders can enhance their power by advocating radical change to restore order. Leaders taking power in unstable environments are also granted more authority because instability demands quick action and unilateral decision making, but once decision-making becomes centralized, it is often difficult to take back.

Perceived Threat

Related to structural and organizational instability is the perception of imminent threat. People are naturally more willing to accept assertive leadership, especially when their employment status is threatened:

The supervision of you will be more strict now than ever. If you do not want to work for me, pick up your check now, or work under my conditions. Failure to comply with the above will mean immediate termination.

Cultural Values

History has shown that destructive leaders are likely to emerge in cultures that endorse the avoidance of uncertainty, collectivism (as opposed to individualism), and high power distance. Uncertainty avoidance involves the extent to which a society feels threatened by ambiguous situations; in such societies, people look to strong leaders to provide guidance.

In Tiger Mike's case, he made absolutely no bones about the sort of culture he intended to foster in his company:

We do not pay starvation wages, and there are some people left in this world who want to work. I am not fond of hippies, long-hairs, dope fiends or alcoholics. I suggest each and every person in a supervisory category (from driller up to me) eliminate these people.

Absence of checks and balances and Institutionalization

Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser describe the degree to which managers are free from institutional constraints as “discretion.” Although leaders need discretion to do their jobs, discretion also allows destructive leaders to abuse their power. In tiger Mike’s case, he was the owner and CEO, and he was more than happy to assert his authority to anyone who dared question him:

I have the privilege of swearing publicly, in front of anyone, or doing anything I want to because I pay the bills. When you work for me, you don't have that privilege. You are representing me. Don't act as I do. I am the only one who can act that way.

Summary

In defining the elements of the Toxic Triangle, and presenting some (admittedly over-the-top) examples of leadership gone amok, a clear picture emerges of how to prevent a poisonous atmosphere from permeating the workplace. It is difficult for destructive leaders to succeed in stable organizations of empowered employees and adequate checks and balances on influence and control.

In a telling epilogue to Tiger Mike’s story, the company he founded with windfall earnings and ruled with an iron fist ultimately failed less than two years after the memos in question were circulated. With nothing to show from nearly 50 dry wells, Tiger Drilling folded after entering Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 1980.

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