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TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND HOW TO AVOID ITS TRAP: A CASE STUDY OF RWANDA GENOCIDE AGAINST TUTSIS

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ABSTRACT

Toxic leadership can be a thorn in the flesh of an organization, undermining morale, productivity, and overall success. This paper discusses the definition of toxic leadership concerning the toxic triangle, which comprises it and are destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment. After its long-debated definition, we underlined that toxic leadership is characterized by self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that harm subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. Toxic leaders often use dysfunctional tactics like deception, intimidation, coercion, and unfair punishment to achieve their personal goals. Common Behaviors of Toxic Leaders have been noted to include abuse of Power, nepotism/favoritism, unquestioned loyalty, bullying, micromanaging, gossiping, deception/withholding information, fear as a motivating Tool, and inability to accept constructive criticism, and finger-pointing. The effects of toxic leadership are such that they lead to workplace bullying, job dissatisfaction, psychological distress, and even depression and burnout. The strategies for dealing with Toxic Leaders are acceptance whereby you recognize that you cannot change them entirely, but manage your expectations; self-adaptation by which you adjust your behavior to navigate the situation effectively; empathy by which you Understand the toxic leaders' pressures and challenges without necessarily tolerating their behavior; speak up so that If your well-being or performance is at risk, report the toxic leaders' actions confidently and seek support from a trusted advisor.

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INTRODUCTION

With reference to the book "The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians and How We Can Survive Them," we will draw on the lessons learned in the Leadership Theory course and our personal experiences to address the issue of toxic leadership. In our assessment, we will include three situations we have witnessed: one from the historical background of my post-genocide country of Rwanda, another from the experience with religious leadership shortcomings, and the third from toxic leadership in a faith-based organization. Using the theories and leadership styles learned in the leadership theory course, we will draw and demonstrate ways to avoid the trap of toxic leadership. In this paper, we shall define toxic leadership from the available resources, describe the three situations of our own experience with toxic leadership, explain the characteristics of toxic leadership, showcase the Rwandan experience of toxic leadership in the 1994 Rwanda Genocide against Tutsi, and discuss the effects of toxic leadership before we embark on ways to avoid those effects.

UNDERSTANDING TOXIC LEADERSHIP

Scholars have not offered a clear definition of the meaning of toxic leadership, leaving the topic with little clarity or with no consensus (Art Padilla, 2007). But with the recent abuses of authority and power witnessed in the political arena, in business, and in religious circles, scholars are getting new momentum in the discussion of toxic leadership.

MEANING OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP

Toxic leadership is also commonly known as destructive leadership, and other descriptors from various viewpoints include evil, harmful, abusive, incompetent, and unethical. The most comprehensive definition to my opinion is that toxic leadership is "the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor, or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates" (Stone, 2022). Art Padilla (2007) calls it a

composite of a confluence of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments, which he truthfully names a toxic triangle. From the management perspective, it refers to a harmful and destructive management style that negatively impacts employees, work teams, and the organization (A. Erickson, 2015). It is also understood as a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that antagonize subordinates, the organization, and mission performance (Erickson, p.1).

Historically, various authors have defined toxic leadership in different ways, failing to come to a consensus over one single meaning. Some consider it from a good point of view. This goodness is seen in the leader and displayed in his positive force, with Padilla citing Howell & Avolio (1992) and Kellerman (2004), who perceived destructive leadership as “an oxymoron and maintain that leadership is by definition a positive Force” despite the noted shortcomings of the mindset that “ends justify her means” (Art Padilla, p. 2). Others perceive toxic leadership as a process or outcome under three assumptions, namely, that a leader's bad intentions are an essential component of destructiveness (Christian N. Thoroughgood, 2018); that certain behaviors are inherently destructive; and that the dark side leader personalities are usually associated with positive effects, at least in the short term (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Toxic leadership is a contrast to constructive leadership (Art Padilla, p. 178), which prioritizes support, transparency, and the value of all members of the organization.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP

Toxic leadership is widely recognized as a lack of concern for the well-being of others, which results in a negative work environment and long-term negative effects (Balasundaram, 2020). This type of leadership is characterized by harmful behaviors that undermine the well-being, morale, and performance of individuals and teams (Joseph, 2023). The impact of toxic leadership extends beyond immediate influence, affecting the entire organizational culture (Joseph, 2023, p.2). It is decisive for organizations targeting to cultivate a positive, innovative, and collaborative work environment to recognize the indicators and repercussions of toxic leadership (Amit Gupta, 2024). Common traits of toxic leadership include self-centeredness, abuse of power, nepotism and favoritism, bullying and micromanaging, dishonesty, and an inability to accept criticism (Seth, 2022). Toxic leaders operate with a magnified sense of self-worth and acute self-interest, consistently using dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to fulfill their own desires (Hughes, 2022). This type of leadership may achieve short-term results through positional power since it is agreed that it is “seldom absolutely or entirely destructive (Robert Hogan, p.179). Factoring the toxic triangle (destructive leaders, susceptible followers and conducive environments) concerns that support toxic leadership, namely charisma, personalized use of power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate (Robert Hogan, p.180), toxic leadership undermines the followers’ will, initiative, and potential, ultimately destroying unit morale (Robert Hogan, Fig.1 The toxic triangle: elements in three domains related to destructive leadership, p. 180).

THREE SITUATIONS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP: WHY DO WE FOLLOW TOXIC LEADERS: Toxic leadership has been associated in most cases with military service, seen in the

form of a bad command climate, inefficient execution, and the opposite of the military’s core identity of strong leadership (Davis, 2016). But in the past year, high-profile organizations like government agencies and churches have also had destructive leaders (Erickson, p. 266-272; Pakpan and Pantan, 2022). While the study of destructive leadership is relatively new, the practice itself is not. Throughout history, destructive leaders have appeared in various spheres of influence (Erickson, p.1). Here, our focus goes to the historical background of Rwanda's post-genocide era, Religious leadership shortcomings, and the case in point of a faith-based organization.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RWANDA'S PRE- GENOCIDE, AND GENOCIDE ERA: THE CASE OF AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS: The case of the 1994 Rwandan pre-genocide era is the epitome of autocratic toxic leadership, from colonial to the first and second republics. Leaders said it all, did it all, and decided it all with little, if anything, left to the followers. A little background reveals that Rwanda comprises three major ethnic groups: the Hutu, the Tutsi, and the Twa, who share the same language, Kinyarwanda, and have coexisted for centuries. However, significant social differences historically existed between the Hutu and Tutsi, with the Tutsi holding social, economic, and political ascendancy. The colonial era saw Germany and later Belgium imposing a rigid classification system based on physical characteristics, further reinforcing Tutsi rule. In 1994, Rwanda experienced a horrific genocide (Britannica, T., 2024). There is nothing in the literature that explains exhaustively why followers followed suit with colonizers and the early Rwanda Independent leaders without questioning.

Before the 1994 genocide, tensions had escalated over the years, leading to periodic outbreaks of violence. The conflict intensified when Tutsi-led rebels from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from Uganda. Negotiations for a broad-based transition government were underway, but Hutu extremists vehemently opposed this plan. On April 6, 1994, the assassination of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana triggered the genocide (Britannica, T., 2024). Again, there was no clear pinpoint of the toxic leadership that was the root cause of the conflict. During the genocide, Hutu extremists systematically killed Tutsi and moderate Hutu individuals, along with 10 Belgian peacekeepers (Rutayisire, 2016). The goal was to eliminate moderate politicians and create a political vacuum for an interim government of Hutu extremists. Anarchy and mass killings ensued. The methods of killing were brutal, involving crude instruments like machetes. Sexual violence was rampant. Shockingly, despite international awareness, no country intervened forcefully to stop the killings (Rutayisire 2016, p. 554).

The Rwandan genocide is a painful, unforgettable experience in human history, serving as an unadorned reminder of the consequences of hatred, propaganda, and indifference (Maximino, 2014) and the very side effect of autocratic, toxic leadership. What is peculiar, in my opinion, to this case is that it serves as a concrete practical example of the toxic triangle whereby destructive leaders were a confluence of susceptible followers and a conducive environment to make the Rwandan genocide happen to the magnitude it did, and to the outcome with corrosive aftermath it produces to both the leaders, the followers, and the entire society. What is admirable in the long-

run narrative is that the same victims, Rwandans, are currently working toward preventing such atrocities in the future and everywhere (Kasande, S. & Christians, T., 2024). This sentiment closely aligns with the post-genocide reflections on Rwanda's recovery. For instance, Liberata Gahongayire's research emphasizes how memory and commemoration play a vital role in preventing future atrocities by fostering collective responsibility and healing (GAHONGAYIRE, 2015). Similarly, Roméo Dallaire, who witnessed the genocide firsthand, has spoken about the importance of victims and survivors leading efforts to prevent future violence (Scott, 2005).

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP SHORTCOMINGS: LEADERS EXPLOITING FOLLOWERS' NEEDS: It is sadly common to hear about religious leaders stepping down due to moral scandals, mismanagement of funds, or abuse of power (Senoga, 2023). There have been cases where even religious leaders have been found guilty of serious crimes. For example, in one of the Methodist denominations, a bishop was convicted of genocide and is currently serving a prison sentence. Additionally, some pastors in our evangelical churches have also been found guilty of genocide and classified as perpetrators of the genocide against the Tutsi (United Nations, 2006). The failures of religious leadership can have significant consequences for both the leaders themselves and their followers, as explained by Richard J. Krejcir (n.d.). According to Krejcir, some reasons behind these failures include the lack of integrity, insufficient oversight, choosing likability over qualification, failure to make disciples, and misuse of power. Toxic leaders who turn out to be religious leaders exploit four followers' needs and two primary followers' fears, namely the need for authority, security, the need to feel special and belonging; the fear of ostracism, and the fear of powerlessness (Lipman-Blumen, 2004). Retrospectively looking at our religious and spiritual experiences, we cannot fail to see how we have been guilty, victims, or accomplices of leaders who took advantage of us at the point of our critical needs.

THE SITUATION OF A FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATION: THE CASE OF CHARISMATIC BUT DESTRUCTIVE LEADERS: The case of charismatic but destructive leaders is well explained by an organization established in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide to address the leadership crisis in East and Central Africa in the 20th century. Rev. Dr. Celestin Musekura founded African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries (ALARM) in 1994 following the Rwandan genocide and civil unrest in Burundi and the DR Congo. Its mission is cultivating servant leaders in Africa, fostering inner healing and reconciliation, and envisioning an Africa free from violent conflicts. ALARM operates in eight countries in East and Central Africa and maintains registered offices in Burundi, DR Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and the US. Over the past many years, ALARM has succeeded in equipping servant leaders of all backgrounds and professions to advocate for peace, justice, and reconciliation while transforming communities. Its servant leadership pillar stems from the conviction that Africa's crises are not necessarily poverty or disease, but a lack of servant leaders who put the needs of their communities and churches above their personal and tribal interests (ALARM, 2019). Such is an organization that trains leaders to give sense and direction to their charisma and turn them away from being harmful to become

constructive leaders. With my experience serving with ALARM in its long lived success stories, this organization in its vision, mission, and best practice principles, serves as a counter example of charismatic but destructive leadership, the opposite of faith-based organizations, which have historically been linked with nepotism, positive discrimination, misuse of power, and funds, in short with toxic leadership (Baker J, n.d.; Chikwanha N, 2022; Green J, 2020).

EFFECTS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP

The effects of toxic leadership can be seen in the analysis of the toxic triangle and its components (Art Padilla, p. 179). These effects of toxic leadership can be severe, leading to workplace bullying, job dissatisfaction, psychological distress, and even depression and burnout (Christian Wiradendi Wolor, 2022). In dealing with a toxic leader, it is imperative to protect yourself and to consider strategies to manage effectively the undesirable outcomes generated by the toxic leadership. In the same way, I totally agree with those who say that it is essential to keep in mind that it is not your responsibility to change a toxic leader, but you can take steps to safeguard your own mental health, career, and the interests of your organization.

HOW TO AVOID TOXIC LEADERSHIP

None of us has ever escaped toxic leadership. We have all been exposed to it at some point in our lives, whether in our workplace, family setting, or even within a community context and volunteer activities (Seth, p. 19). Toxic Leadership impacts all of us. This is why we so desperately need to understand it. Dealing with a toxic leader can be challenging, but there are strategies you can employ to manage the situation effectively. Some ways we have applied in our context, and were found to be working are acceptance whereby you recognize that you cannot change the toxic leaders entirely, but manage your expectations; self-adaptation by which you adjust your behavior to navigate the situation effectively; empathy by which you understand the toxic leaders' pressures and challenges without necessarily tolerating their behavior; speak up so that if your well-being or performance is at risk, report the toxic leader's actions confidently and seek support from a trusted advisor (M.C. Pizarro, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This paper took us into the discussion on toxic leadership, for which the meaning has no consensus among the scholars, but a trend toward accepting the toxic triangle of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments is seen. This makes toxic leadership synonymous with destructive leadership. This is followed by the identification and explanation of the characteristics of toxic leadership and its effects, the three situations are explained, and an application is drawn on how to deal with toxic leadership.

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