

Detoxifying a Toxic Leader

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As an esteemed colleague once said, "consider the red ink." Red ink is the cost that quickly adds up when a leader (or manager) in your organization has such poor behavior and soft skills (the skills that build rapport and relationships in an environment of respect), that he or she creates a toxic environment.

For example, a toxic leader may bark out orders without respect for the receiver, or present unpredictable moods that keep employees afraid and vigilant. The red ink flows when time, productivity, and spirit are drained slowly out of individuals who encounter these tough leadership and management styles.

If you consider the lost contributions never made by dispirited employees, plus the time spent overcompensating for and commiserating about the difficult leader, the costs are clear. In addition to the soft losses, you can price out the wasted time in terms of each person's salary, and quickly you see enormous hard-dollar figures that become interpersonal red ink. What's worse, you stand to lose high-value talent because of difficult management styles or a leader's sloppy interpersonal behavior.

The purpose of this article is to detail simple actions to place toxic leaders – the cause of those red ink problems – onto a path toward healing, before their relationships with their staff and peers are permanently crippled by the negative impact of their poor leadership skills.

Why do "toxic" leaders continue their problem performance?

Everyone is afraid of the bully in a leadership position. Generally, it is imperative to develop good rapport with the other members of your "club." If the bully gets angry with you, he or she will make you out to be the bad guy, actively trying to damage your reputation. In order to do damage control, you side step the difficult leader, and hope he or she turns the negative attention on someone else. This avoidance behavior gives the bully momentum, because no one dares get involved for fear of professional damage.

The only thing the bully respects is authority from above. Thus, the only way to get help in dealing with a difficult manager is to appeal to someone in a higher position who can intervene. Looking higher up to find a strategic partner for leverage can allow you to set in motion an incredibly effective "leader-changing program." In addition, it can support improved productivity and performance for all the others who have been affected.

How do you influence problem leaders?

You may be directly involved with a red ink bully in close organizational relationships, or you may hear about him or her regularly in the hallway or in closed meetings. The challenge is how to take action with the belief that something can be done, and neither you nor the bully will "get in trouble" as a result.

One way to eliminate the fear of speaking-up is to get your senior team and CEO on board. This can start with a clear management-group statement that, more than just valuing open and honest communication and feedback, they insist upon it if the firm is to stay competitive.

This approach deals with a key problem: Red ink bullies are experts at blaming truth-tellers by asserting that they are whiners or complainers. The bully knows that their attack generally will silence and call into question any feedback that thwarts his or her power. When the senior team already has taken a strong stand for open communication and feedback, the bully is cornered and left just one option: To change his or her negative performance and to improve in the area of soft skills leadership.

Enlisting the help of a strong and trusting human resources manager is also a good intervention strategy. HR often has a pool of resources with proven relationship skills, who can be pulled in to help with the bully leader. Sharing the specific problems, and the impact to you and others, should ignite a good HR manager to take action, as he or

she will be acutely aware of the high cost of replacing you or the bully, or doing damage control once the situation becomes severe and many departments are involved.

A “quick fix” won’t work.

When a difficult leader or manager is wreaking havoc, sending him or her to a course on leadership will do nothing to alter the behavior that stems from deep-seated negative belief systems, blind spots, and unconscious behavior. Teambuilding, in the traditional sense, will not alleviate the pain of those around the bully. Style inventories, or other courses that highlight differences, will not change the situation. All of these methods aim at the intellect, and neglect the more basic human components and the uniqueness of every individual. Plus, they disregard the way in which we learn to adapt based on lifelong experiences and repeated wounding over time. We build walls of resistance around soft spots from such injuries, and thus we create holes in our soft skills abilities. Those holes cannot be filled by fancy quotes or leadership jargon. The core issues must be addressed head on, and with on-going regular feedback that ensures that goals are attained and that the negative behavior is eliminated.

Soft skills change is slow and developmental. It is important to beware of the short course, quick fix programs, which are also expensive, and do not yield positive results with toxic leaders.

Overcoming resistance.

The bully or difficult manager or leader is full of resistance to change. This is to be expected. The resistance and anger that rear their ugly heads in the beginning of a soft skills intervention are a natural part of the human protective response. The bully behavior is actually a form of resistance in itself, designed to protect the manager or leader from the very same treatment they dish out to others. The bully cannot handle criticism, so typically stays ahead of the curve, by being the first to initiate it.

The bully is also a victim, and once formally entrenched in a leadership development program that is supportive and structured, he or she can indeed overcome resistance in order to change and grow in the areas that have been targeted.

People can, and will, change.

The old models of threat, order and hierarchy have been losing ground in favor of collaboration and flat teams, in part because of long-term time demands. Yes, threats can work in the short term, but long-range change requires support, encouragement, and a safe space for exploration of the past, and for creation of a new vision. Step by step coaching, that honors the individual’s experiences, has been proven effective when confidentiality and respect are woven into the leadership development program.

Turn negative into positive behavior.

Once the red ink bully is actively engaged in a leadership development program, he or she can begin to set weekly goals that address the feedback. Proactive repair of professional relationships is an essential element in the program. Wherever damage has been done, conversations about goals, change, and improved performance begin to help not only the bully, but everyone that touches his or her work-life.

During this process, goals toward improved performance can be made public, (with the individual’s consent) and the bully can advertise attempts to change behavior, helping those around him or her to see that efforts are being made in the right direction.

Co-workers are very forgiving when the focus of the bully’s behavior becomes learning instead of blame and pain. New behaviors and attitudes and beliefs slowly replace the negative beliefs and blind spots that were limiting the effectiveness of his or her soft skills leadership performance.

One positive result of such a process is that the entire organization is impacted when anyone in a leadership role becomes humble and open to core changes. If you are the person that spotted the bully behavior and took action toward intervention, you may feel an incredible personal sense of reward. You may see yourself as a key player in the evolution of the human spirit of your company, and in its advancement toward a more sustainable “human” culture that truly values learning, cooperation, and collaboration. Handing leadership development “crutches” to a “broken” leader can be the greatest gift you could ever give to the individual – and to your entire organization.

[1-50](#) [51-100](#) [101-150](#) [151-200](#) [201-250](#) [251-300](#)
[301-350](#) [351-400](#) [401-450](#) [451-500](#) [501-550](#) [551-600](#)
[601-650](#)

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