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The e-newsletter of the COPS Office | Volume 7 | Issue 3 | March 2014

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Are toxic leaders derailing your community policing efforts?

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Don't let toxic leadership derail your community policing efforts. The late Sam Walton, founder of the most successful retail sales operation in the world (Walmart) believed that the key to retail sales is the relationship between the sales person and the customer.

Translating this to law enforcement, the key to successful community policing is the relationship between the patrol officer and the neighborhood they serve. The quantitative and qualitative nature of the partnership development and problem solving ability necessary for sustained successful community policing will be dependent on the nature of that stakeholder relationship. Toxic leaders within your department can negatively impact that relationship.



Toxic leaders that poison the workplace environment demoralize personnel, create disincentives, produce unnecessary stress, stifle creativity, decrease risk taking, and promote themselves on the backs of the rank and file, while they present an obstacle to organizational transformation and the institutionalization of community policing.

If you are having difficulty with organizational transformation and the institutionalization of community policing, your agency may be infected with toxic leadership. Identifying the toxic leaders in your department and preventing or mitigating the damage they may do could be the secret to improved employee morale and job satisfaction that leads to improvements in collaborative partnership building and problem solving. This can ultimately lead to a more positive organizational culture that translates into enhanced service to your community.

Symptoms of toxic leadership may include low morale, disgruntled employees, high rates of sick leave use, turf protection, high rates of turnover, and an us versus them climate that widens the gulf between leaders and the rank and file.

Identifying the toxic leader can at times be tricky. The loud, boisterous, demanding leader may not necessarily be a toxic leader. They may be loud and demanding and still place the interests and wellbeing of their personnel above their own. They may enjoy other traits that display a sincere caring for their staff, traits that contribute to high morale and a positive work environment.

“Destructive leaders are focused on visible short-term mission accomplishments. They provide superiors with impressive, articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions. But, they are unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate. They are seen by the majority of subordinates as arrogant, self-serving, inflexible, and petty.”

Craig Bullis and George E. Reed, “Assessing Leaders to Establish

On the other hand, the quiet seemingly timid leader who focuses on advancing their personal goals at the expense of others may be doing an inordinate amount of damage.

and Maintain Positive Command Climate,” A Report to the Secretary of the Army, February 2003.

The ability of some toxic leaders to impress those up the chain of command with striking presentations and short term successes can mask the harm they are doing to the workplace and the overall mission.

Army Colonel George E. Reed describes three traits of the toxic leader as:

1. An apparent lack of concern for the wellbeing of subordinates
2. A personality or inter-personal technique that negatively affects organizational climate
3. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest¹

Some attributes that may help in identifying toxic leaders in your department include arrogance, a perfectionist attitude, lacking in self-confidence, shallow, condescending toward subordinates, bullying, unexplained irritability, and causing divisions among staff.²

Rank and file personnel will generally avoid the toxic leader by transferring to other units when possible and avoiding assignments falling under the leader's command or supervision. In some cases personnel may leave the department and even the field of law enforcement. Although subordinates will usually be the first to identify the toxic leader, they are not in a position to address the problem or improve their plight.

Dealing with the problem of toxic leadership is a top down affair—the responsibility of executive management. According to Roy Alston, Ph.D., and George Reed, Ph.D., in their article on Toxic Police Leadership, there are measures that can be taken to prevent the emergence of toxic leadership and/or mitigate its effects. Measures include:

- Put a label on the problem (toxic leadership) and talk about it openly
- Develop and select with an eye to leadership style, not simply technical skills and short-term effectiveness
- Hold supervisors responsible for the leadership style of their subordinates
- Implement climate assessments and 360-degree multifaceted evaluations as developmental tools
- Have the hard discussions with subordinates who display toxic tendencies and promptly address behaviors that are not in keeping with the values of the organization³

Toxic leadership issues left unchallenged can produce a toxic organizational culture that could make it more difficult to establish problem solving partnerships with external customers, jeopardizing your community policing efforts.

Left unchecked, toxic leaders can be successful in promoting their personal agenda, pleasing their leaders with short-term successes, and taking credit for work performed by subordinate staff members. They often perform well in written examinations and subjective reviews from higher ups they work hard to please, failing to acknowledge the contributions of subordinate personnel. This frequently translates into movement up the promotional ladder.

“The culture of an organization is like a river. It can be fluid, strong and consistent, serving as lubricant while guiding its members in the right direction. In contrast a river can become stale and toxic, silently killing those who drink at its shore”

Ron Kaufman, *Prometheon Builds a Company Culture That Serves, Sizzles and Succeeds* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

Seeing this, some ambitious subordinate personnel emulate the behavior of the toxic leader in order to advance their own career. The result can be an increasingly toxic culture not conducive to the organizational transformation that promotes the institutionalization of community policing.

The symptoms of toxic leadership should not be ignored and senior executives should not be fooled by the toxic leader's short term results or the façade of loyalty the leader displays in their presence. Symptoms should be thoroughly investigated however, being careful not to attach the toxic leader label to someone undeserving of it.

Dealing with toxic leadership's malignancy before it thoroughly infects the organizational culture can produce dividends; dividends that can remove some of the bumps in the road toward institutionalization of community policing.

Karl W. Bickel

¹ Reed, George E., Toxic Leadership, Military Review, July-August 2004,p. 67, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/box_toxic_leadership.pdf, accessed 1/28/2014

² Gammage, James C., Toxic Leaders A Primer, TEKKEK Stop Dreaming Take Action <http://tekkek.com/entrepreneur/management/2013/04/toxic-leaders-a-guide-to-spotting-and-coping/> accessed 2/125/2014

³ Alston, Roy E, Reed, George E, Toxic Police Leadership, Law Officer Police and Law Enforcement, Tuesday November 26, 2013, <http://www.lawofficer.com/article/leadership/toxic-police-leadership> accessed 1/28/2014

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