

Susceptible Followers and Conducive Environment: The Gateway to School Leaders Toxic Behaviour

AUTHOR(S): ORUNBON, NURUDEEN OLALEKAN

AND

MOHAMMED, MUBASHIRU OLAYIWOLA BABATUNDE (Ph.D.)

Abstract

This is a position paper which examines followers and environment as core contributory elements in the emergence of Toxic school leaders in the school systems. Leaders, followers and their environment are the power base for the leadership itself. Therefore, leaders are helpless sometimes too. This means that, they can be wrongly motivated in a direction that will not be beneficial to the school organisations by their followers. Occasionally, effective school leaders turn out making poor decisions because the ambitious followers are joined into a single entity and persuasive about a plan to achieve a goal. It is important for the school leaders to be more incredulous of the preponderance perspectives of the followers to look into their views more closely. At a different time, leaders get into difficulty because they are encircled by followers who are ambitious, eulogise the leaders with flattery words and insulate the leaders from discomforting actualities. Any organisation that tolerates any act of toxicity from its leaders will be more likely to breed conformers and colluders as followers, so the environment plays an important role in immortalising toxic leaders' behaviours. The connection between the leaders, their followers, and the environment can be leverage to the toxicity outcome of the leaders. It is hard for toxic leaders to come off in stalwart organisations with stout establishments where adequate checks and balances on power and control are monitored.

CJAR

Accepted 15 May 2020
Published 30 May 2020
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3875705



Keywords: Leadership, Toxic Leader, Susceptible Followers, Conducive Environment,

About Author

Author: ORUNBON, NURUDEEN OLALEKAN

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7479-2624>

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT,
FACULTY OF EDUCATION, LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY, OJO, LAGOS, NIGERIA.

Email: orunbon.nurudeeno@gmail.com

&

MOHAMMED, MUBASHIRU OLAYIWOLA BABATUNDE (Ph.D.)

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT,
FACULTY OF EDUCATION, LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY, OJO, LAGOS, NIGERIA.

Email: myuniversity@yahoo.com



1. Background

The concept of leadership exists in every culture, in a childhood period, children follow their leaders and copy their behaviour, and the leaders in return give the children direction. In the school system, students in secondary schools get the opportunity to become class captains, school prefects, presidents, vice presidents or secretaries of school voluntary organisations. As people are familiar with effective or good leaders so also engaging with leaders that behave in a way contrary to the way good leaders behave.

The impact a toxic leader has on an organisation can reach far and wide which can create lasting and enduring harm to the organization's culture and climate (Aubrey, 2012). A toxic leader can be defined as an individual who by dint of their destructive behaviours and dysfunctional personal qualities generate serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

If toxic leadership is merely a symptom of the source of problem, it is suggested that the characteristics of the follower and environment of the school teachers could empower a toxic leader. The attitudes, behaviour and actions of a toxic school leader can significantly affect teachers' job commitment, job satisfaction, and the overall organisational climate (Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015).

In secondary schools, teachers work hand in hand with principals, the vice principals and other principal officers of the school. Teachers in particular, are persons that are expected to work toward accomplishing educational goals. Generally, teachers' responsibilities include the actual teaching, setting, administering and marking of students' assignments, tests papers, examination scripts, monitoring students' progress and the like. In these responsibilities, teachers are usually expected to function independently, carry out these duties with little or no supervision. The school leaders' roles are more of administrative duties in giving direction and provide leadership. Teachers are closer to students and are expected to produce good results. However, they need the support of the school leaders to be very effective. They need the school leaders' direction and guide; they need their leadership. It is therefore necessary that the school leaders are aware and understand teachers' followership in order for them to know the best approach to use in working with teachers for maximum effectiveness and school improvement.

Ideally, leadership-followership relationships in school system should be filled with rewards, sense of belonging, freedom in job operations, showing of recognition, and competency for both parties. Despite that, for teachers who have assumed higher position in the school setting, this relationship may also form the basis for maltreatment, abuse, and punishment, accompanied by teachers' feelings of frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, and displeasure (Orunbon, 2020).

2. Toxic Triangle

Toxic triangle theory suggests three components necessary for a toxic leader to thrive (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). Based on this theory, toxic leadership is merely one dimension of the toxic triangle. That is, leaders cannot be toxic on their own, but require susceptible followers to lead and a conducive environment in which to lead. Without the remaining two dimensions, a toxic leader is merely a person in a position of authority to lead others within his/her sphere of influence.

Each dimension of the toxic triangle framework has its own elements and traits to further describe what constitutes a toxic leader, susceptible follower or conducive environment. Based on toxic triangle framework, leadership scholars have begun to explore the interplay



each dimension has within a toxic leadership situation. Moreover, some traits, influences and impact it can have on the overall toxic triangle. Padilla, *et al.*, (2007) toxic triangle theory as lens through which to examine the relationships between toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environment.

2.1 Toxic Leadership

Schmidt (2008) determined there were three common themes amongst the definitions of a toxic leader:

1. underlying neglect for the well-being of their subordinates;
2. micromanaging where subordinates are cowered and stifled; and
3. indicates that toxic leaders are narcissistic.

They are multiple styles of negative leadership which include petty tyranny (Reed, 2015), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), and destructive leaders (Padilla, *et al.*, 2007). As a result, research has found toxic leadership can be defined within a multidimensional construct that includes the behaviours from several types of negative styles that combined create the following toxic leadership behaviours, viz; Abusive, Authoritative, Narcissistic, Self-Promoting and Unpredictable (Schmidt, 2008).

2.1.1 Abusive

Abusive supervision can be defined as a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision much like an abusive romantic-relationship can be characterized as sustained or enduring in the sense that it is likely to continue until the relationship is terminated, or the leader modifies said abusive behaviour (Tepper, 2000). Abusive behaviours can be characterized by public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions and coercion (Bies & Tripp, 1998). It is observed that these displays of hostility that the abusive behaviours of supervisors can be seen to overlap those behaviours of toxic leaders. Moreover, Tepper focuses on the followers' interactions with the abusive supervisor as well as how the abusive behaviours may be perceived in accordance to specific organizational policies or norms.

2.1.2 Authoritative

Authoritative behaviour is demonstrated by a leader when she or he asserts authority control over subordinates, demanding absolute respect and unquestionable obedience (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004). School leaders with this element of toxic leadership behaviour has some overlaying elements such as micromanaging subordinates through forceful behaviours. Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, (2010) also found within their study of authoritarian leadership that those individuals predisposed to Machiavellism are more likely to adopt an authoritarian leadership behaviours. This has always been major instrument in the hands of school leaders in showcasing their toxin behaviour within the school setting.

2.1.3 Narcissism

Narcissistic leaders are defined as leaders who possess a grandiose sense of self, and a preoccupation with themselves (Doty & Fenlason, 2013). Narcissists are grandiose self-promoters who strive for admiration from others (Paulhus, 2014). Narcissists exhibit an excessive ego and show selfish behaviour (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissistic adoration involves the seeking of uniqueness, glorious delusion, and appealing behaviour. Narcissistic rivalry is characterized by the pursuit of superiority, mark down of others, and aggressive behaviour. While narcissistic admiration leads to a self-confident, dominant, and expressive appearance, narcissistic rivalry entails arrogant and contentious behaviour. In the mid- to long-term time range, narcissistic rivalry leads to a strong decrease in popularity in social groups (Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015).



These types of leaders in the school system are extremely focused on themselves, believe in their goals, the recorded success in the school setting and how powerful they are among the subordinates. This is due to the fact that leadership is revolved around positional power and reputation. School leaders that are narcissists are usually believed that they know it all. It is argued that narcissism in itself is not a destructive behaviour of leaders, yet, when the school leaders begin to take steps or actions that improve his or her prestige or position to the threat of the school organisation, then the school organisation bears the consequences.

2.1.4 Self-promoting

Self-promoting behaviour has been defined as the behaviours that promote a leader's own interests above the interest of their unit's interests or mission (Schmidt, 2008). Another element of toxic leadership, this type of behaviour can also be demonstrated in a leader's intention to abate threats from rivals and talented subordinates. Aiming to distinguish a positive image from their leadership hierarchy, self-promoting leaders tend to accomplish organisational goals within the short-term without considering long-term consequences, usually at the expense of their subordinates (Steele, 2011). The school leaders with this element of toxic leadership have their interests above the interests of the entire school; here the school leaders use self-promoting mechanism to decrease threats from colleagues who are yet to assume the position of leadership and critical thinkers among the school teachers.

2.1.5 Unpredictability

Unpredictability is defined by Schmidt (2008) as a wide range of behaviours that reflect dramatic shifts in mood states. When a leader is characterized as unpredictable, their negative behaviours are complexified by their unpredictability. Schmidt's research suggests that the unpredictability of a leader was the strongest predictor of both subordinates' willingness to stay in their organisation and their satisfaction with their supervisor. Schmidt concluded that the unpredictability of a leader can make a leader toxic. Unpredictability stance of the school leaders increases the school teachers' anxiety. School teachers never know what kind of behaviour to expect, and this unpredictability keeps everyone on edge all the time. In essence, when subordinates are more often exposed to toxic leadership unpredictability manner, they always have defensive mechanism as shield for them against such leaders. Situation like this in school organisations always put teachers on their toes so as not to offend the school leaders.

3. Susceptible Followers

Followers are indispensable part of the leadership arrangement without which becoming leaders will be difficult. In the popular discussion 'he who thinks leads without followers is only taking a walk'. It is argued that any good leader is in turn that he/she has been a good follower before. Toxic leaders in school setting would not have evolved without followers. Lipman-Blumen (2005), recognized that leadership requires at least two willing participants- the leaders and the followers. It is suffice to ask the pertinent question that why the followers continue to participate with the leaders once leaders show toxic behaviours? Therefore, two types of susceptible followers are usually collaborating with leaders to perpetuate toxicity in any organisation, they are conformers and colluders. Conforming followers obey toxic leaders out of fear and are inexperienced to the fact that toxic behaviour is immoral. Colluders, on the other hand, naturally play along with the toxic leader's agenda in order to have personal gain as a mean of personal enrichment.

3.1 Conformers

The issues of Conformer revolve around, Unmet Basic Need, Low Self-Concept Clarity, Low Core Self-Evaluations and Personal Life Distress.



When a follower's need is unmet, an opening is left for a leader to come and meet that need. These needs include a desire for security, group membership or predictability in an uncertain world (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla, *et al.*, 2007).

In the school setting this type of dependency creates an uncondusive relationship whereby the school teachers may decide to go along with the toxic leader-relationship because it is positively meeting their needs. Therefore, the school toxic leaders will get away with the perpetuating of the toxicity within the school without check.

Low self-concept lucency can also play a role in being a conforming follower. Studies on the development of ego, moral reasoning and the self-concept have suggested that individuals are more likely to conform to authority when they are psychologically immature (Padilla, *et al.*, 2007). Individuals pick up knowledge and grow through their experiences, and these experiences are what condition how they see themselves and their morals. Thus, when an individual has to go through an experience that tests their underdeveloped self-concept, they are more likely to conform to the leader and their toxic ways. This can result in immoral behaviours. Therefore, subordinates need to be prepared to oppose their leader's toxic behaviours (Beightel, 2018).

Also, low core self-evaluation is another characteristic of a conformer. Core self-evaluations are the basic conclusions or bottom-line evaluations that individuals hold about themselves (Judge & Bono, 2001). One's core self-evaluation consists of her or his self-esteem, locus of control and self-efficacy. Low core self-evaluation is created by a low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and an external locus of control (Padilla, *et al.*, 2007). For instance, if school teachers have low self-efficacy they do not believe they can perform well in this way regularly seeking affirmation in every school academic engagement. These poor behaviours leave opportunity for toxic school leaders to break down the teachers through bully, verbal abuse and manipulation. All in all, a low core self-evaluation makes teachers susceptible to following toxic school leaders.

Personal life distress is the final characteristic for a conforming follower. Previous literature has shown that some individuals experiencing an emotionally distressing change may be susceptible to a toxic leader's influence (Cushman, 1984; Shaw, 2003; Wright & Wright, 1982). During these endangered times of transition, loss or conflict a follower's desire for control, friendship and purpose is increased. Seeking fulfilment, followers are not only in defenceless states but are also unprotected to being influenced by seemingly toxic leaders masquerading as charismatic or successful leaders.

3.2 Colluders

On the part of Colluders their interests in toxic leaders are: Personal Ambition, Machiavellianism, Greed and Low Impulse Control.

Personal ambition is the first characteristic of a collusive follower. Colluders tend to act in their own interests. Thus, a colluder will likely endure the toxic behaviours to progress their agenda if there is any financial, professional, or political incentives for participating in a toxic leader's mission, (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Padilla, *et al.*, 2007). Teachers in this act in the school setting always exert all energies in order for his/her personal ambition to be materialised, on personal ambition to them, it is the issue of survival of the fittest.

Machiavellism is the second characteristic of a collusive follower. A type of social influence, Machiavellism, is characterized by harnessing power, politics and expressive behaviour to achieve desirable ends (Thoroughgood, 2013). Described by four factors, Machiavellist distrust others, partake in amoral manipulation, desire control in all things, and desire status above all else. Therefore, when the opportunity presents itself to gain power, status, and



control the Machiavellist-colluder will use their persuasive prowess to grown within the hierarchy of a toxic leader. Machiavellist-teachers play dirty politics in the school system, manipulate others in order to survive, desperate for power and control and bully other teachers occasionally.

Furthermore, greediness is another characteristic of a collusive follower. It is the part of the habit of colluders to be selfish due to his/her personal ambition and the propensity to gain power by dubious acts. Colluders often greedy because of the selfish desire to have financial benefits and juicy position within the system. Greedy colluders will continue to romance with toxic leaders as long as it is beneficial to them in terms of financial gains, power, information or position. It is suffice to say that greedy teachers in the school setting are the corrupt teachers who compromise everything for their survival.

Finally, low impulse control is the last characteristic of a collusive follower. Low impulse control means that these individuals possess low levels of self-control displaying no restraint from engaging in deviant behaviours as they do not consider the long-term consequences of their behaviour (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This means that colluders with low impulse control are short-sighted, risk-takers that have a strong desire for immediate gratification. Thus, they are more likely to act immorally for a toxic leader if they know they will be rewarded despite what that means for others (Beightel, 2018). School teachers with low impulse control are always at the side of the school toxic leaders in order to gain their favours like attendance in seminars, conferences or workshops, being the chairmen of various committees in the schools and host of other goodies that come through the influence of the school leaders.

4. Conducive Environment

Subsequently, a conducive environment is the third element of the toxic triangle (Padilla, *et al.*, 2007). An organisation's culture can be predicative of the personnel's behaviour and outcomes in different situations (Aubrey, 2012). In a situation, where school tolerate toxic behaviours from the school leaders there are likelihood to have conforming school teachers. Conducive environment revolves around, Instability, General Organisational Culture, Perceived Threat, Ethics, Favouritism, and Absence of Checks and Balances.

Instability is the first characteristic of a conducive environment. This characteristic captures the degree to which an organization is constantly changing (Alvarado, 2016).

In a school setting, every act of change creates feelings of insecurity and uncertainty within the school especially among the teachers particularly when jobs are on the path with the emergence of the change. As a result, toxic leaders usually come into power in an unstable environment. Followers target in any engagement are certainty and security, so any leader that can meet follower's unmet needs will be easily accepted.

General organisational culture is the second characteristic of a conducive environment. Organisational culture is a system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs which governs how people behave in organisations. Cultural norms of an organization can potentially have a positive or negative effect, research suggests that the behaviour of toxic leaders may serve to rationalize or excuse negative behaviour in the group and establish a new toxic set of norms (Bolton & Grawitch, 2011; Krausz, 2011; Summers, 2010). According to Kellerman (2004) bad leaders thrive in organisations known to tolerate unethical and bad behaviours such as favouritism. Furthermore, if the organisation values and incentivizes the wrong thing, both leaders and subordinates will partake in bad or unethical behaviour while perceiving it as normal since it has become engrained in their culture (Thoroughgood, *et al.*, 2011). When



school system is compromised within and outside, this in return give birth to toxic leaders who emergence through the compromised system.

Perceived threat is the third characteristic of a conducive environment. This characteristic can take the form of any threat facing the organisation whether it be a social, economic, or a sense of mistreatment within the organisation (Alvarado, 2016).

Padilla, *et al.* (2007) explained that a perceived threat is all that is needed for a leader to take advantage of their subordinates. Moreover, the perception of a threat gives the organisation a common enemy which strengths the leader's position in the organisation. Appearance of school supervisors from the Inspectorate Division of the Ministry of Education can give school toxic leaders an avenue to show leadership so as to subjugate the school teachers under them. Ethics is the fourth characteristic of a conducive environment. This characteristic can be defined as a systematic set of codes and rules intended to govern morals (Parker, 1998). The foundations for an organisation's code of conduct, ethics are usually driven by the leadership of the organisation (Bagely, 2011). Organisation's culture that fosters ethical behaviours will benefit from sound and moral decisions. However, when ethical decisions and behaviours are not seen as a standard, the boundaries of what is acceptable among an organisation can be blurred. It is in these incidences when a toxic leader can behave beyond what is acceptable as a leader (Beightel, 2018). In a school setting where the organisational culture devoid of ethics, such school will give room for the emergence of toxic leaders at the helm of affairs.

The fifth characteristic of a conducive environment is the act of favouritism. Explained through the literature on leader member exchange theory, the relationship that followers have with their supervisors can impact their access to rewards, opportunities, and resources within the organization (Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropaki, 2016). Studies have shown that when followers are within the "in-group", they will identify less of the toxic leader's behaviours than when they are on the outside (Pelletier, 2012). Toxic leaders in the school system usually favour those teachers who are with them particularly the conformers and the colluders and are more likely to deal with those who are critical of the leaders in the school setting.

An absence of checks and balances is the sixth characteristic of a conducive environment. Organisations with an absence of checks and balances have centralized control where upper management possesses the most leverage (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). It is worthy to note that, when toxic school leaders are in a leadership position with centralized power and they know that no one will be checking in on them, there is a higher tendency of an abuse of such power.

Most followers in an organisation can identify the actions and behaviours of their leaders that promote a perception of favouritism. Based on the leadership-member exchange theory, those of the "inner group" (the favourites) will perceive the toxic leader's behaviours as honourably and just, while the "outer group" will perceive the leader's behaviours unjust and destructive (Martin *et al.*, 2016). As result, favouritism may not only influence the presence of susceptible followers but also increase the divide and rule mechanism in the organisation which can deteriorate the morale, commitment and productivity.

5. Conclusion

Athirst and peevish school leaders who are always on the brink of apprehension at school could also reproduce toxicity. These leaders develop a habit of expressing uncontrolled anger, often slapdash behaviour, shout, use abusive language, downgrade school teachers openly and setting unreasonable deadlines and demands.



In conclusion, susceptible followers and conducive environment in a school setting often give leeway for toxic leaders to unleash their toxicity. This is because toxic leaders do not have anyone to head or handle in a toxic manner without the subordinates or followers. Toxic leadership subverts the school core values by eroding diligence, commitment and productivity, putting self before predetermined aims of the school system, and delivering excellence through undesirable means.

It is worth to note therefore that it is hard for toxic leaders to come off in stalwart organisations with stout establishments where adequate checks and balances on power and control are monitored.

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Cite this article:

Author(s), ORUNBON, NURUDEEN OLALEKAN, MOHAMMED, MUBASHIRU OLAYIWOLA BABATUNDE (Ph.D.), (2020). "Susceptible Followers and Conducive Environment: The Gateway to School Leaders Toxic Behaviour". Name of the Journal: Commonwealth Journal of Academic Research, (CJAR.EU), P, 1- 11. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3875705> , Issue: 2, Vol.: 1, Article: 1, Month: May, Year: 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.cjar.eu/all-issues/>

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