The Forgotten Followers of Toxic Leadership

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Abstract

This paper calls for more research about toxic followers. The current body of research identifies two categories. Generally, followers misbehave by either conforming or colluding with the toxic leader. However, given the complicated nature of defining toxic leadership as a relatively new leadership style and even less literature about susceptible followers, it may be possible to place conformers in two subcategories.

Keywords; Conformer, Colluder, Toxic Triangle,

The Forgotten Followers of Toxic Leadership

"And here you are living despite it all." – Rupi Kaur

Most people follow a leader sometime in their lives and can describe the experience as good or bad. The former likely had the best outcome, but the latter likely had more impact. Toxic leadership can change people's lives causing mental health and physiological health problems. In addition, organizations spend almost 24 billion dollars annually (Park et al., 2017) on the fallout caused by toxic leadership, Numerous published books and many numerous published articles exist in the literature (Kellerman, 2004) about leadership and followers. But unfortunately, toxic leadership has a small portion of existing literature.

Dinh et al. (2014) found 752 peer-reviewed journal articles about leadership published between 2002-2012. Although mainly at the end of the search years, only twenty-two articles had empirical data studying destructive/toxic leadership. (Dinh et al., 2014). More recent examples of questionable leader behavior continue to emerge from all disciplines. Defined parameters for toxic leadership and followership seem scarce, as the two often interchanges. The ambitions and motives that cause the leader/followers to behave the way they do provoke questions.

Toxic leaders likely manipulate their power because they envision themselves in leadership roles for the wrong reasons (Winn & Dykes, 2019). By comparison, appropriate leaders use trust as their primary motivator, accompanied by solid organizational support. Drawing comparisons and contrasting to more established undesirable traits like narcissism, toxic leadership remains a somewhat new and unexplained leadership style.

Problem Statement

Toxic followers fall into two categories based on active or passive loyalty. In addition, the literature describes colluders and conformers as susceptible followers in a Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al., 2007). However, the toxic triangle and follower categories have limited studies validating only two types of conformers. Therefore, the current toxic triangle model addresses conformers and colluders but does not explain what happens to the rest.

Background Information

Indirectly or directly toxic leaders leave followers and organizations wondering how an organization can deteriorate to the brink of collapse. This is because the toxic leader fails to recognize their flaws (Latta & Whitely, 2019). In a perfect world, people with different opinions talk and mutually benefit from the experience. Unfortunately, that often does not happen, especially when the toxic leader maintains influence over all aspects of the organization. Regular exposure to toxic behavior creates pressure on followers to make decisions about their future.

The extra pressure on followers leaves them questioning how to reach unattainable goals and spend energy trying to appease the leader. When the toxic environment becomes routine, the followers are presumed trapped; thus, toxic environments bread toxic leadership in a cyclic format. Without intervention, complacency continues with the assumption that followers are as toxic as the leader.

Theoretical Framework

Behavioral approaches of leadership require two interactive components to build leadership and corresponding behaviors. First, most accept that learning and teaching through observation establish these relationships. Second, relationships are the critical foundational to

how organizations develop the follower's role and generally help define who benefits and who does not in the relationship.

Toxic leadership and destructive leadership are two terms often used interchangeably to describe undesirable follower and leader relationships. Sometimes, leader and follower behavior combine, producing toxic results in the work environment. Padilla and colleges introduced the two types of followers in a toxic environment.

Colluders and conformers combine with the toxic leader and the conducive environment to form a toxic triangle (Padilla et al., 2007). Expansion on Padilla and colleagues' work explored and refined the roles of colluder and conformers. Although used on a limited basis in subsequent topic exploration, some researchers developed scales that predict follower behavior working with toxic leaders.

Toxic leaders use the system to take credit for others' work, perhaps rendering intervenors unnoticeable. With more and more examples of toxic leaders appearing in the mainstream media, the opportunity exists to identify a more hopeful outcome for followers. True, many leave toxic leaders, and some stay for negative reasons. Still, just like toxic leadership is not an accumulation of random acts, toxic followership should hold the same merit. The current body of research, on the surface, provides a sound conceptual understanding, but the scarcity of follow-up studies destabilizes what defines misbehaving followers in a toxic organization. A deeper understanding of susceptible follower categories may help organizations retain good employees, lessening the financial impact of turnover.

Generally, leadership began as a relationship between someone in charge and followers. Practitioners widely accept that leaders cannot exist without followers and vice versa. However,

considerable periods such as the industrial revolution challenged the notion that leaders are born and not made. Trait leadership began in the early twentieth century and argued that intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability were universally applicable to born leaders (Smalley et al., 2016). People who possessed these inherited qualities had a natural attraction; people would unexplainably follow them, and they were well-liked by both followers and stakeholders. Well-known trait leaders include Napoleon, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa. In the proper context, the trait framework can predict the effectiveness of individuals. Like any other scientific field, researchers questioned the presence of other leadership selection options.

Traits can predict the appearance of good leadership, but can traits act as a measure of effectiveness? As it turned out, performance outcomes matter to organizations. The Ohio State University study of the 1940s suggested that trait leaders are task-oriented, not follower orientated, with the technical, human, and conceptual skills needed to motivate people (Smalley et al., 2016). Followers have expectations of their leaders as well. Employees are positively affected by leaders that create an environment that promotes the exchange of ideas, involves followers in decision-making processes, and provides opportunities for advancement.

Framework for Analysis

I used the meta-analysis method to conduct a literature review. A meta-analysis helps identify research gaps and helps resolve conflicting findings (Grewal et al., 2018). I searched several keywords including: poor leadership, toxic survival, narcissism, and well-known theories like leader-member exchange, Social Learning Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. I found that the variable outcomes in definitions for keywords like *destructive leadership* and *toxic leadership* seemed challenging to define. However, relevant information appeared in agreed-

upon criteria that presented a direction that pointed the researcher more on a follower concentration.

I found the basis for researching conformer subcategories in a study published in The Leadership Quarterly after enlisting the help of Granite State College Librarian Lia Horton. Through a sophisticated searching program, Dinh et al. (2014) found that 752 articles using quantitative, qualitative, methodological, or theoretical methods were in their ideal top ten journals. The results were only twenty-two articles grouping toxic leadership with destructive leadership[1]. Dinh et al. (2014) reported fifty-three percent (53%) of the articles found were event-specific to an organization problem. Unfortunately, I could only verify four sources cited by Dinh and colleagues within available resources.

After learning the articles were not available, I attempted to recreate the results of Dinh and colleagues. Using the Granite State College online library database, I searched for key phrases, including toxic leaders and toxic followers. Surprisingly, only 224 peer-reviewed articles appeared in the results. Many of the articles were industry-specific or behavior linked to toxic leadership (such as narcissism). Like Dinh et al., only twenty-four toxic follower articles appeared, further refined to just three peer-reviewed articles not already reviewed for other content in this paper. Also, many articles addressing toxic leadership and the ideal follower. To help create a framework for literary analysis, I searched for answers to the following questions within the available resources.

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[1] Dinh and collogues searched: The Leadership Quarterly, Administrative Science Quarterly, American Psychologist, Journal of Management, Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Journal of Applied Psychology, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Organizational Science, and Personnel Psychology

- What is toxic leadership?

- How does the environment play a role in toxic leadership?

- What are the consequences of toxic leadership?

- What is toxic followership?

- What is the consequence of toxic followership?

- Can employees move between the susceptible follower categories?

Literature Review

Building on existing literature, the author explored what factors contribute to followers staying in a toxic environment and what firms can do to overcome long-term toxic leadership while identifying a possible research gap to explain subcategorizing conformers.

Underlying Psychological Theories

First, the author recognizes the essential psychological theories researchers identify about human behavior in a group environment. The Social Learning Theory (SLT), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Leader-member Exchange (LMX) are only three examples of widely accepted cognitive theories that help explain leadership behavior. The three approaches picked as part of this paper were based on frequent appearances in the reviewed literature.

Social Learning Theory

Scholars generally accept the Social Learning Theory (SLT) that says people learn by observing others and understanding the consequences of behavior (Liu et al., 2019). Leaders and followers observe, retain, and replicate bad behavior that eventually becomes normal in a toxic organization. Chen et al. (2019) correlate the SLT to organizational behavior, contributing a three-pronged approach to misbehavior. First, Chen and colleagues argued that poor leadership

interactions and follower acceptance predict follower Pro-Social Rule Breaking. Or workers knowingly violate rules to protect someone or the organization. Also, Chen et al. (2019) argued that in the interest of saving the organization, people who break the rules do not have cruel intentions, concurring with Naeem & Khurram (2020), who argued that sometimes good people stay in dysfunctional organizations.

Social Exchange Theory

A closely related (and often confused) theory to the SLT is the Social Exchange Theory (SET). Like its counterpart, the SET relies on a set of rules to establish behavior expectations. However, researchers identified the fundamental difference between the SLT and the SET as understanding behavior exchanges between people. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), a series of interdependent conversations establish normal behavior. In other words, people can raise, or lower expectations based on past interactions. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), reciprocity is a continuous exchange between parties. Sometimes repeated behavior establishes a connection between people, and unspoken rules sometimes become normal.

Leader-member Exchange

Perhaps the most frequently encountered in the literature was the Leader-member Exchange (LMX). The Leader-member Exchange (LMX) focuses on the positive connections between followers and their leaders, emphasizing the communication channels leaders need to grow to avoid unfair follower treatment. But exceptional leaders sometimes encounter difficulty establishing positive relationships with their followers (Yu et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2014), inadvertently creating in-groups and out-groups. The interesting part that relates to toxic

behavior is how researchers frame trust. In one recent study of survey questions from over 1,000

workers from different disciplines, Derindag et al. (2021) made an essential correlation between

toxic leadership and followership. The researchers suggested that leaders who pay less attention

to followers who sometimes disagree erodes trust and increases burnout and turnover intention,

damaging morale. Interestingly, Derindag and fellow researchers (2021) added that stress does

not affect the choice to leave. Instead, job satisfaction is the driving force behind the intention to

leave, differing with Naeem & Khurram (2020), who offered that while indirect, job satisfaction

and stress are intent to leave factors.

Toxic Leadership

In the available research, scholars have developed a series of terms to describe poor

leadership. Examples include absentee leadership, abusive (non-physical) leadership, and

generically applied destructive leadership. However, researchers lack a clear definition of toxic

leadership. Some say that toxic leaders' nature requires uncertainty to maintain a culture that

questions followers' desire to leave or stay. Interestingly, Park et al. (2017) described toxic

leadership as a phenomenon. A phenomenon usually relates to a remarkable event or situation,

such as a total solar eclipse. For some people, a full solar eclipse happens once in a lifetime. In

her book *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad,* Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker (1996) coined

toxic leadership as the (red light) of leadership and cautioned organizations that these leaders are

fundamentally flawed and will eventually self-destruct.

Military leaders have a particular interest in studying toxic leadership (Winn & Dykes,

2019). Schmidt (2008) targeted military participants in the first of two studies for a

straightforward reason. Military subordinates have a higher tolerance for toxic leaders because

of command-and-control structuring (Schmidt, 2008), meaning they have a higher toxicity

exposure rate than the public. United States Colonel George Reed offered a definition that

developed a sense of urgency to toxic leadership. He wrote, "A toxic leader is a poison to the

unit – an insidious, slow-acting poison that complicates diagnosis and the application of an

anecdote." (Reed, 2004, as cited in Schmidt, 2008, p.71)

 The Toxic Triangle

Perhaps the most relevant theory appearing was the Toxic Triangle. Multiple research

papers referred to the work of Padilla et al. (2007). The Toxic triangle resulted from an in-depth

study aimed at a more definitive explanation of destructive leadership. The leader and followers

connect and rely on each other, creating a system created in a social environment that

undermines organization productivity and has noticeable effects on employees.

Many researchers exploring toxic leadership and followership used the work of Padilla

and colleagues as a foundational resource. The landmark study was one of the first to present

destructive leadership in a different paradox, including that leadership can produce good or bad

results (Padilla et al., 2007). Or the study represents leadership as something other than a

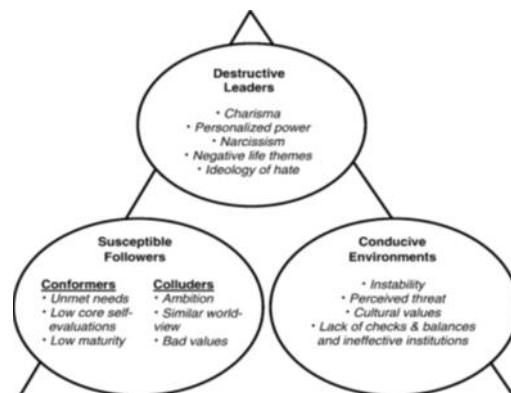collection of random acts. Figure One is an adaption of the toxic triangle.

Figure One: Adapted from Padilla, A. B., Hogan, R. B., & Kaiser, R. B. (2007). The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conductive environments. The Leadership Quarterly, 18, 176-194. doi:10.1.1.322.4077&rep =rep1&type=pdf

Destructive Leadership

The most notable portion of a toxic triangle is leadership. Padilla et al. (2007) performed a comprehensive literature review of destructive leadership. As a functional part of group performance measurements, Padilla et al. hypothesized that it is nearly impossible for leaders to behave poorly all the time. Therefore, other factors must contribute to behavior problems (2007).

Narcissism

A significant behavior problem of toxic leaders is narcissism. Some of the characteristics found in the research described narcissism as lack of empathy, insecurity (low and high self-esteem), lacking values, controlling, egotistical, and dominating (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Nowak & Zak, 2020. Others add narcists have an extreme sense of vulnerability (Kowalchyk et al., 2021; Matherne 2019). Two sources describe narcissism as a clinical diagnosis (Ekizler, & Bolelli, 2020; Schyns et al., 2019).

Similarly, researchers describe toxic leaders as inciting fear, lacking values, self-promoting, downward controlling, bullying, inappreciative, dominating, and having a lack of empathy (Watkins & Walker, 2021; Bell, 2020; Bakkal et al., 2019; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Milosevic et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2008; Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Thomas et al., 2016; Walker & Watkins, 2020). Given the similarities used to describe narcissism and toxicity, it is reasonable to understand the interchangeability of the two terms

Difference Between Toxic Leaders and Narcissistic Leaders

A narcissist spends energy controlling people. Schmidt asserts that toxic leadership is an overlapping condition of the toxic triangle, and unlike the narcissistic person whose behavior is unpredictable, toxic leadership is a stable condition (2008). Schmidt did acknowledge narcissism

as part of the toxic triangle when he wrote, "I concur that narcissism is a component of toxic leadership and should be measured as part of this larger construct, not as the opposite of expected and accepted good leadership traits" (Schmidt, 2008, p.11). The toxic leader, on the other hand, takes advantage of the organizational system, not people.

Charisma

According to Padilla et al., charismatic leaders are not always destructive, but they can be dangerous (2007). People generally view charisma as a positive trait. Charismatic bad leaders use vision, charm, and enthusiasm to over emphasize achievements and cover mistakes (Padilla et al., 2007; Winn & Dykes, 2019). As a result, they appear highly effective to their superiors, even when followers see their dark side (Hogan et al., 2021). Decisions made by charismatic leaders can have harmful effects on the organization because charisma itself causes bad decisions (Hogan et al., 2021). Therefore, the results of the charismatic leaders will not always reflect expectations, at least as seen from outside the leaders' immediate influence.

Negative Life Themes

Toxic leaders tend to use charisma to exaggerate their accomplishments. They can also use life stories to harm the organization. The toxic leader's worldview sometimes reflects an adverse life event (Padilla et al., 2007). In turn, the negative feelings allow the toxic leader to ignore others' feelings and exploit them (Padilla et al., 2007). The constant negative view allows the toxic leader to generate hate.

Ideology of Hate

The events that cause a negative life view become hateful for the toxic leader with a critical difference compared to effective leaders. The toxic leader blames someone, maybe

themselves, for what caused their negative view (Padilla et al., 2007). Something from the toxic leaders' past triggers their hatred, and they cn associate it with their current environment.

The Toxic Environment

Perhaps the organizational setting holds the key between narcissism and toxic leadership. Sakkar Sudha & Shahnawaz (2020) found that the narcissist's quality of life is self-centered and fragile (more individual-based). On the other hand, the toxic leader uses the organization system to hide incompetence and consolidate power (Milosevic et al., 2020; Naeem & Khurram, 2020). Furthering the discussion about the toxic leader relying on others around them to validate their behavior, Neves & Schyns (2019) found that gradual system manipulation builds the toxic leader, often through political channels in hierarchical organizations.

In 2014 Schmidt studied toxic leadership as more systematically born. He declared that toxic leadership does not affect any one person. Instead, it affects the organization, the individuals, and the stakeholders collectively (Schmidt, 2014). A stern declaration that toxic leadership threatens an organization's safety makes sense considering Schmidt's (2008) work that found the unpredictability of a toxic leader overlaps in the toxic triangle. Schmidt's study looked at the job-satisfaction as a criterion. Productivity, turnover, profits, and loyalty (how long employees stay) are frequently measured criteria (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Yaghi, 2019; Bakkal et al., 2019) that indicate the presence of good leadership and bad leadership. To summarize, if leaders can behave good or bad, their positional power makes followers susceptible to harm.

Positional (legitimate) power is one of French and Raven's five types (1959). Positional power affords toxic leaders leverage not experienced by followers. Laws in some states (such as

New Hampshire) limit the criteria organizations can use to separate public leaders[2]. With

language built into statutes, the toxic leader has a degree of autonomy to exert control over

followers, rendering them passive participants (Milosevic et al., 2020; Baker, 2007;

Thoroughgood et al., 2018; Bligh & Kohls; 2012). Another study found that one-third of

participants indicated that the organization's denial of concerns left them worried (Webster et al.,

2016). In other words, followers often feel trapped and hopeless because the toxic leader seems

untouchable.

The View from Above

Indeed, systemic problems shield the toxic leader from harm, increasing their confidence

for the wrong reasons. For example, some researchers found that the I can do no wrong, attitude

stems from inadequate systems around the leader's power (Naeem & Khurran, 2020; Paltu &

Brouwers, 2020). Essentially, the people overseeing the leader do not hold them accountable.

Lackluster responses from those overseeing toxic leadership call into question the culture

of the organization. Followers (and leaders) expect the organization to frequently assess the

culture, structure, and practices identifying areas for improvement. If an organization ignores its

responsibilities, the unstable environment becomes unethical (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013) and

isolates the victims (followers). This will manifest in the toxic leader's agenda-specific

communication (plausible deniability) and provocation. Bakkal et al. (2019) asserted "toxic

people only thrive in toxic systems" (p.89), implying toxic leadership and followership apply

universally. Toxic leader behavior and the conductive environment, combined with the behavior

of other followers and malicious social building, profoundly predict the outcomes of toxic

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[2] New Hampshire RSA 154 outlines the duties of and strict criteria towns can use to fire a fire chief. RSA 105
outlines the same for a police chief appointed in New Hampshire.

workplaces. Therefore, the behavior of the toxic leader fragments the organization and indicates the presence of susceptible followers.

Susceptible Followers

Kellerman (2004) wrote, *"*the leader and at least some followers lack the will or skill (or both) to sustain effective action" (p.51). Padilla et al. (2007) followed with "certain followers are unable or unwilling to resist domineering and abusive leaders*"* (p.183). Thus, although some argued that theoretical research (such as Padilla's 2007 work) is only process-oriented and stresses stability by aggregating events or behaviors (Dinh et al., 2014), scholars still accept the conformer and colluder scales for their work.

Conformers

The group that fears the leader and complies because of the consequences is called conformers. The conformers' unmet basic needs, poor self-evaluation, and psychological immaturity make them vulnerable to a bad leader's power (Padilla et al., 2007).

Unmet needs. Toxic leaders have a unique ability to use the system to manipulate their followers, and they are aware of how to take advantage of both. To the conformer, the toxic leader seems to provide the security people learn as children and carry to adulthood (Kellerman, 2004). One scenario is a family contributor. Providing for a family matter more to conformers than their leaders affect them (Padilla et al., 2007; Beightel, 2018; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Even being cognitively aware of a poor culture, the sense of belonging to an organization creates an ongoing mental assessment (Thoroughgood, 2013). In other words, the follower rationalizes extreme consequences for losing their job.

Poor self-evaluation. Self-evaluations are baseline life-related feelings such as self-esteem (Padilla et al., 2007). Followers with unmet basic needs find themselves trapped in the toxic leaders' influence because of a landmark event that created a large void (Beightel, 2018) in their self-esteem. Therefore, the appeal of companionship (Thoroughgood, 2013; Beightel, 2018) or staying close to the leader diminishes the need for self-evaluation. Conformers associate with a leader with seemingly high self-esteem to hide their low self-esteem. Thoroughgood added that belonging and companionship are immeasurable appeals to most people (2013). Thus, a toxic leader affects the conformers' psychological maturity.

Low psychological maturity. Early research concluded that people in a crowd tend to drop their defenses. When faced with a resounding leader, the leader symbolically becomes the guide (Padilla et al., 2007). Thoroughgood likened the toxic leaders appeal to cult leaders, who convince people to see what does not exist because the conformer lacks meaning in life that the leader now provides (2013). As a result, the conformers lay low, hoping to keep their place in the organization.

Colluders

The followers who share the same social views as leaders make up the colluder category (Padilla et., 2007). Colluders can be dangerous for the organization because they hide in plain sight, have strength in numbers, and focus more on advancing the leader's agenda

Ambition. Colluders are the achievers in a toxic organization because they stay close to the leader (Padilla et al., 2007). The thought of more power and authority motivates the colluder to perform and execute the leaders' agenda. Often their agenda is littered with short-term gains, political maneuvering, and promotional aspiration (Thoroughgood, 2013; Beightel, 2018). Thoroughgood introduced the concept of Machiavellianism as part of the colluder scale (2013).

Machiavellians have a cynical view of people, lacks morals, and have a thirst for power. These selfish followers are forceful in their actions with little regard for consequences (Thoroughgood, 2013), which appeals to the toxic leader.

Selfishness. The unquenchable thirst for power, status, or goods at any cost exposes the selfish person to manipulation by a toxic leader (Thoroughgood, 2013), particularly in the business industry (Padilla et al., 2007) even though Thoroughgood offers that selfishness is universal (2013). Beightel feels the selfish follower will stay with the leader if it benefits the follower (2018).

Low Self-Control. The people with little regard for consequences if the leader shields them have low self-control (Thoroughgood, 2013). with Beightel adding inappropriate, risky actions and deviant behavior, earn praise from the toxic leader (2018

Toxic Triangle Limitations

The work of Padilla and colleagues abruptly stopped at broad definitions of the susceptible follower categories. Padilla et al. acknowledged their study needs more research to validate follower characteristics (2007). Factors like maturity, ethics, job satisfaction, and compliance (Schmidt 2008; Thoroughgood et al., 2018) may test the follower categories. For example, suppose a person can self-evaluate even during toxic employment. In that case, it is reasonable to suspect they can consciously choose to be a positive role model and not fall into a different follower category. Subsequent research explored such a notion.

Follower Effects of Toxic Leadership

If organizations and people know that toxic leadership has more negative effects, two questions arise. 1) How do toxic leaders keep their job? 2) If seventy-one percent of participants

in one study reported that they wanted to leave an organization because of the leaders' behavior

(Paltu & Brouwers, 2020), why do people stay?

Toxic Staying Power

Answering the first question of how toxic leaders keep their job is quite simple; they hide

in plain sight. Toxic leaders function well in dysfunctional organizations because they often

create the culture. If an employee has the resources to succeed, one can argue they also have the

resources for destructive goals (Milosevic et al., 2020). Unlike the narcissistic leader, who is

oblivious to their surroundings and only cares about their importance (Ekizler & Bolelli, 2020),

the toxic leader controls the organization, protecting the status quo (Watkins & Walker, 2021).

Everyone in an organization has someone they answer to, and sometimes the toxic leader

becomes quite the con artist. Toxic leaders are good at changing accountability from their job

expectations (Kowalchyk Et al., 2021). Essentially, toxic leaders can talk their way out of

negative feedback.

Another explanation for toxic leadership survival is the lack of organizational

accountability. Eventually, the toxic leaders do not fulfill their obligation to the organization

(Winn & Dykes, 2019). Many aspects of what causes an oversight this prominent include

communication or manipulating information from the toxic leader. Protecting their interests

matters most to the toxic leader (McGrandle, 2019; Neves & Schyns, 2016; Milosevic et al.,

2020). Therefore, it is not uncommon for the toxic leader to data-mine or change information to

hide performance-related issues.

But the roots of the problem generally start early within the organization. People

advanced in the organization usually reflect the company's positive culture (Latta & Whitely,

2020; Bell, 2020; Krasikova et al., 2013). Conversely, Mehta and Maheshwari offered, toxic leaders, serve as potential role models for toxic followers (2013). The toxic leader may start as a loyal team player. Promotions to top positions do not automatically mean utmost commitment (Yaghi, 2019). Put another way, organizations may hire a more assertive personality to cope with an organizational crisis, but such action may not equate to desired results. A lack of empathy, not caring about organizational goals, and the advancement of personal goals eventually spell trouble for the toxic leader (Thomas et al., 2016; Milosevic et al., 2020) and the organization. Of course, communication plays a role. When dysfunctional leaders withhold essential information and dodge face-to-face interactions, both parties have difficulty interpreting leader effectiveness (Milosevic et al., 2020; Krasikova et al., 2013), leading to longer leader tenure by stalling feedback systems. Much of the blame for toxic organizations falls on leadership, but followers can be toxic and not always because of leader influence.

Toxic Followership

Dismissing the possibility that followers can contribute to a toxic culture would be an oversight. Toxic followers can give the toxic leader the credibility they desire. In some cases, a follower becomes toxic by coercing the leader into undesirable behavior (Thomas et al., 2016). Possible reasons for this behavior include revenge or the (colluder) follower's desire for the leader's job. People sometimes forget that even toxic leaders have feelings. They are just as susceptible as anyone to social stresses that hinder skill development (Milosevic et al., 2020). Organization synergy depends on allowing everyone to perform well. Also, some followers will use feedback systems to exaggerate the leaders' lack of skills (Thomas et al., 2020). They use performance evaluations, surveys, and 360-degree evaluations to expose the leader at the risk of exposing themselves (Thomas et al., 2020).

Physiological Suffering

Many individuals working in a toxic environment will likely say the stress of working in a dysfunctional organization affects their well-being. The perpetual state of ambiguity (stress) can apply to any human interaction but working for what seems unachievable exhausts employees (Latta & Whitely, 2019). Most of the damage caused by toxic leaders relates to organizational goals. However, proximal harm to employees includes work/life balance, health, and poor job satisfaction (Krasikova et al., 2013; Naeem & Khurram, 2020). Work/life balance problems may surface as depression, sleep irregularities, questioning one's worth, high stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. Physical problems include increased blood pressure, raising the risk of acute coronary events, and neurological events. Some argued that how vigorously an ineffective leader pursues their target contributes to health problems (Ekizler & Bolelli, 2020). Also, toxic leaders will target those who threaten their position (Van Rooij & Fine, 2018). They will harass employees by amplifying the slightest mistake(s) then ridicule the person publicly. In response victims try to stabilize the organization through absenteeism, resigning, and avoiding communicating with the toxic leader (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020).

The more followers are manipulated and harassed, the more susceptible they become. Victims of toxic leaders feel powerless and hopeless. Research revealed that new employees who intend to leave the toxic leader question their skills (Milosevic et al., 2020). Others isolate themselves inside the toxic system by agreeing (conforming) with the toxic leader, working longer hours, and trying flattery (Webster et al., 2016). Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) hinted people would stay at an organization because their connection to the work outweighs the toxic barrage. In another study, emergent leaders dedicated to changing the organization entice people to stay (Nowack & Zak, 2020).

Time Will Tell

Once toxic leadership settles in an organization, it is hard to eradicate. One person alone cannot defeat toxic leaders (Schmidt, 2014) because it takes tremendous effort to overcome a dysfunctional system. However, help is on the way. According to Winn and Dykes the millennial generation is the largest in fifty years and will occupy seventy-five percent (75%) of the workforce by the end of 2025 (2019). Millennials have a lower tolerance for unfulfilled promises, and eventually, organizations will catch on and start changing. In addition, follower perception of what needs improving contributes to the length of time it takes to repair an organization (Neves & Schyns, 2016), creating urgency around toxic leadership and the ideology that all followers are as harmful as their leader. Unfortunately, the author did not find literature exploring how or if Millennials provide an antidote for toxic leadership.

Identifying the gap

The research conducted by Padilla and colleagues addressed colluders and conformers but did not explain what happens to the rest. Not long after introducing the toxic tringle by Padilla et al., more researchers began examining the follower categories in an organizational setting.

Toxic Leadership Scale

The work of Schmidt (2008) was one of the first to explore the colluder and conformer criteria. Schmidt used qualitative and quantitative methods to develop predictive outcomes of susceptible followers, arguing toxicity as unstable (Schmidt, 2008), opposing the argument by Padilla et al. that it is stable. An essential framework for Schmidt was the argument that toxic followers' coping mechanisms such as absenteeism, poor performance, groupthink, and higher

benefit costs are boundaries that block proper follower categorizing (Schmidt, 2008). Nineteen

ROTC responders answered focus-group initial questions (used to validate the integrity of the

study). Two hundred eighteen civilian participants responded and allowed Schmidt to develop a

comprehensive 105 question Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) used to predict intention to leave and

other factors associated with employee disengagement (Schmidt, 2008). Aside from confirming

toxic environments as stable, Schmidt found toxic leaders rely on unpredictability. Dysfunctional

leaders may not always act toxic, but that will not diminish the impact on followers (Schmidt,

2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Like the transformation leadership style, Schmidt also noted that

toxic leadership is not only a subordinate-leader relationship exchange; it occurs as a separate

connection within the organization (Schmidt, 2008). For example, the toxic leader minimizes

motivation and innovation, hoping to disconnect employees from the organization's goals. The

transformational leader uses inspiration and innovation to establish a positive connection

between workers and the organization. However, as in the case of military organizations,

followers have little choice but to align with the culture. Even with some organizations using the

TLS, critics argue that fictional scenarios (used by Schmidt, 2008) targeted toward specific

behavior do not accurately predict follower behavior (Beightel, 2018).

Coping Mechanisms

Using a Conservation of Resources theory (COR) approach, Schmidt revisited followers

in a follow-up 2014 study. Researchers frequently use COR to understand resilience in adverse

organizational circumstances, including stressful environments (Bardoel & Drago, 2021). This

time, Schmidt's focus was purely on military organizations and hypothesized that subordinates

have little recourse to leave (2014). He hoped his study would empirically prove the impact of

toxic leadership on job results. After realizing his (TLS) did not predict turnover intention,

Schmidt refined the TLS to fifteen items and distributed it via Defense Equal Opportunity

Management Institute (DEOMI). Three thousand three hundred nineteen responded. They were

divided into 149 groups with a framework idea that if groups are present in a toxic environment,

those groups must be meaningful (Schmidt, 2014) and in some way helps followers cope with

toxic leadership.

Schmidt worried that his 2008 work did not apply to all industries. As a limitation to his

2008 work, Schmidt noted that many military jobs transfer to civilian employment, but few

civilian jobs transfer to military culture (Schmidt, 2008). In addition, heavy workloads, tight

deadlines, working under similar hierarchy structures (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005) have different

meanings outside military organizations that may influence toxic perceptions. For example,

working on the Dow Jones floor may not imply the same urgency as sweeping a minefield or

production and distribution deadlines.

It is essential to note the relevance of reliability and the strength of Schmidt's refined

scale (2014). He used the Cronbach alpha reliability to validate the refined TLS. Scientists agree

that Cronbach's alpha predicts internal consistency when comparing grouped items. Cronbach

alpha reliability above .70 is acceptable (Bell, 2020). Schmidt concluded that cohesive groups

focused on a productive cause are more resilient to toxic leaders (2014). Therefore, Schmidt

found people can overcome the clutches of common toxic leadership behaviors (Abusive

supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, unpredictability, and self-promotion) but

offered no other guidance and asked for more research. Bell (2020) noted that Schmidt's 2014

refined scale was the subject of limited subsequent studies with all reporting alpha reliability

above .80.   Figure Two is an adaptation of Schmidt's reliabilities

Schmidt dimension (2014)	Alpha reliability
Abusive supervision	a = .79
Authoritarian leadership	a = .84
Narcissism	a = .81
Unpredictability	a = .85
Self -promotion	a = .85

Figure Two: Adapted from Schmidt, 2014; Bell, 2020

Toxic leaders follow behavior patterns that commonly fall in the dimensions listed in Figure 2. Therefore, at least some followers have hope to overcome toxic leadership. However, the only way to defeat toxic leadership is to battle back (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Schmidt, 2014; Beightel, 2018; Decoster et al., 2021; Einarsen et al., 2007; Blanchard et al., 2009). According to Schmidt's study, people use calling out of work or disengaging from their job as resources to cope with toxic environments. Unfortunately, some followers run out of resources and become more susceptible to adverse toxic leadership (Schmidt, 2014).

The interesting point that relates to the susceptible follower scale was a limitation of Schmidt's study. Unit commanders request their unit be part of Schmidt's study introducing the possibility that they knew about their behavior. Another limitation was some of the respondents were deployed and while others were stationed. Schmidt mentioned that in-garrison (deployment) had little effect on respondents but did not mention the respondents' length of commitment (two years, four years, career personnel). Perhaps, the most significant limitation was the unpredictability factor that signaled a willingness to stay in the organization to the surprise of Schmidt (2014). The length of time people stay in an organization may not mean they remain for the leaders' protection or agenda. And they may not regularly interact with the leader.

Building on Schmidt (2008, 2014), who offered followers are not passive organization participants, Thoroughgood (2013) hypothesized that colluders and conformers interactions might contribute differently in a toxic organization. Thirty-eight subject matter experts (including graduate students and faculty of psychology programs) validated questions about ambition and leave intention to develop a susceptible follower tool. Over 1,000 students participated in Thoroughgood's study. The large sample had a distinctive validity feature. Every organization has groups with individuals at the top, in the middle, and at the bottom. An inter-hierarchy substructure builds with longevity (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Similarly, if people are to either collude or conform, they must work together for a reasonable amount of time before deciding their fate and aligning with toxic leadership (Alvarado, 2016).

Thoroughgood's study participants average almost seven and a half years of (mixed) work experience (Thoroughgood, 2012). Some participants worked full-time, some were part-time, and some did not have work experience. An important conclusion found was that workers could neutralize the impacts of toxic leaders (Thoroughgood, 2012; Kilburn, 2010). Contrasting literature suggested followers might be blinded by a toxic leader's ambition therefore unable to decide if they will collude or conform (Pelletier, 2010; Decoster et al. (2021).

Thoroughgood provided substantial understanding about conformers and colluders, but in 2013 revisited his work. In the second study, Thoroughgood wanted to find specific measures that separate the susceptible follower categories. Thoroughgood grouped the foundation of both susceptible follower groups into one group introducing the possibility that followers can be both but not either (2013). Thoroughgood used the convergent and divergent validity analysis technique as part of the 2013 study as one validation component. Tests that are expected to be related and are, in fact, related pass convergent validity.

In contrast, data that should have no relationship and do, in fact, not have any ties pass the discriminant validity test. Scientists agree that convergent and discriminant validity research has excellent applicability (Kragh et al., 2019). Some of the data in Thoroughgood's conformer scale data was moved to the colluder scale because "no interactions were found between scores on the colluder scale and the leader styles variable on participants' desire to work for the leader and their whistle-blowing intentions" (Thoroughgood, 2013, p.75). Despite the minor discrepancies, the significant positive correlation to a follower gap was that people who follow the rules despite knowing the ethical conditioning do not fall on either the colluder and conformer scale (Thoroughgood, 2013). Thorogood also noted that conformers could evaluate leadership intentions rendering them less susceptible to toxic influence (2013).

Follower Labels

Following the rules might unfairly apply a label. Hoption et al. (2012) conducted a literature review analysis hypothesizing that people working with toxic leaders act the way they do because of the follower labels. Some followers can and do inject positivity in organizations, and until researchers and scholars consensually agree on a follower definition, empirical research may provide applicability (Hoption et al., 2012). For data sampling, the researchers asked university students to answer questions about their view followership. Almost 500 students participated in two studies with a critical similarity; all were part-time employed. Hoption et al. argued that part-time employees might offer a more precise direction for followership because they may be less engaged in the organization. Still, they can purposely spread ill-will toward each other or the leader (2012). Participants answered deliberately skewed questions such as "To what extent would you say you are a follower while performing your job?" introducing possible

bias that the researchers acknowledged (Hoption et al., 2012). The researchers designed the studies to first label people as followers and then tested if they were self-labeled.

Ultimately, the researchers found that positive feelings about one's job mediate the unfair follower labels of toxic organizations. Therefore, researchers, scholars, and leaders should exercise caution when using follower labels (Hoption et al., 2012). The authors also asserted that the negatively surrounding of the susceptible follower label is grounds to eliminate the follower label (Hoption et al. 2012), with Bell concurring almost eight years later (2020).

Bell's 2020 study enlisted 330 online non-traditional graduate students that said they all worked for a toxic leader (sometime in life), answering questions like "Are you highly committed to and energized by your work and organization, giving them your best ideas and performance?" (Bell, 2020). Asking pointed and direct questions allows one to think critically about their work (Blanchard et al., 2009) and indicates if a connection to a higher purpose negates negative leadership (Bell, 2020). Despite the potential bias of using home-based students, Bell acknowledged followers lack a complete understanding, and research must develop more refined measurement scales (2020) or drop the labels altogether.

Alvarado (2016) acknowledged followers lack understanding and could outmaneuver toxic leaders, but the environment (side of the toxic triangle) has a more significant impact than previously studied. In some instances, the toxic leader comes from the outside (Alvarado, 2016) and thrives in an unknowing but supportive culture by forcing the good people to leave and only colluders and conformers remain. The foundation of the study challenged the prior work of Kelly, who argued that inarguably not more than two types of followers existed (2008),

280 (seventy-two percent female) participants answered questions designed to measure the instability of organizations and how employees interact with one another to lessen negative leader actions. The result of the study was the Alvarado Work Environment Scale of Toxicity (AWEST) (Alvarado, 2016). Alvarado found supportive colleagues can band together and create an environment inside toxic organizations that buffer toxic behavior. However, like all studies, this one had limitations.

Alvarado (2016) acknowledged the study's lack of empirical testing and encouraged others to test the model. Decoster did and added the follower categories might overlap (2021). Also, Alvarado feared the high percentage of female respondents might differ from studies with gender diversity because of the high frequency of male harassment toward female employees.

Follower Attributes Outside Padilla's Scale

Shifting from the theoretical context that indicates another follower category exists, it's essential to explore follower behavior that does not align with the categorical framework of colluders and conformers.

Like its counterparts in the toxic triangle, the follower aspect relies on anticipated behaviors as a matrix. One study explored how the LMX affected reciprocity (Pelletier, 2010), or how the follower perceived their relationship with the toxic leader dictates if they will retaliate. It is important to note that Lipman-Blumen, cautioned against challenging a toxic leader if followers lack strength in numbers (2005). From a different perspective, the eighteen-item scale developed by Pelletier (2010) was essentially an individual threat assessment with a follow-up five-item confrontational scale asking pointed questions about direct leader wrong-doing. The interesting finding from the more than 298 college student participants with varying work

experience was the context of specific threats. If followers preview an immediate threat to their well-being, they will retaliate regardless of the relationship with the leader (Pelletier, 2010). Milosevic et al. added retaliation may not mean physical harm. Instead, employees use job outcomes (by doing the minimum) to protect their work from the toxic leader (2020).

Job Outcomes

Other researchers studied job outcomes as a followership link. In some cases, workers can rationalize meaning independently and not conform to societal or organizational culture (Blanchard et al., 2009; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). In other words, some followers are not intimidated by those occupying positions of power, as the toxic triangle suggests for susceptible followers. Similarly, another study found that followers and leaders are profoundly different people. In an empirical study, Bligh and Kohles contributed a study concluding that followers who do not act on their ability reinforce their stereotype (2012). Bligh and Kohles added common practice refer to the leader as good and followers as bad (2012), while Kilburn (2010) found the factors that determined which followers were at the top or bottom of the scales inconclusive. The finding suggested the susceptible follower scale(s) is a pedestal based on the past. In addition, forward-thinking can allow conformers to drop the lost souls' label applied by Thoroughgood et al. (2012).

Pelletier (2010) thought the concepts of differences overlap, preventing clarity (2010). Answering only two survey questions: Have you seen experienced toxic behaviors, and what specific instance you have witnessed the behavior respondents yielded conflicting results. First, when followers disagree about toxic leader behavior, they are less likely to confront the leader (Pelletier, 2010), aligning with the conformer follower criterion. However, the researcher did not

find validation data for the conformer category (Pelletier, 2010), contrasting with some findings that show tolerant organizations (of bad leadership) likely produce conformers (Beightel, 2018).

Group Culture

Followers choose to follow the leader or not (Kilburn 2010), and the group setting may influence follower decisions. How employees interact as a group (teamwork) seems to play a role in the toxic follower context. Humans formulate their identity based on intention, and consequences define their reputation (Hogan et al., 2021). Working together helps reduce the self-inflation of toxic people (Schmidt, 2014), and group settings allow people to conclude what is toxic behavior and what is not (Hogan et al., 2021). The findings here contradict the premise of the toxic tringle as a hopeless process with the followers unable to use their integrity. Hogan et. (2021) also contended that holding a group accountable for poor performance creates enemies.

Integrity

The establishment of integrity introduces ethics. Some followers will either collude or conform, waiting out the toxic cycle, hoping for someone to emerge (Thoroughgood, 2013; Lipman-Blumen; 2005), while hopefully going unnoticed. Sometimes feeling too new to an organization make a difference (Watkins & Walker, 2021). Most agree that ethics are not transient, or ethical people will act on moral principles regardless of the environment. One team of researchers used the Social Learning Theory to see if integrity was a cost-benefit analysis for follower revenge. In a two-part study using 109 Belgium undergraduate students and 203 working people across different Belgian industries, Decoster et al. found that followers are more likely to retaliate if they trust each other (2021).

One scientific study described retaliation as "restored justice perceptions persistent over time and extends to well-being outcomes" (Liang et al., 2021, p.2). Therefore, intervention by followers can change the ways of susceptible followers. However, the researchers were uncertain about the immediate gratification of retaliation wearing off and the employees seeking more (Liang et al., 2021).

A lack of communication can erode trust (Latta & Whitely; 2019). Also, confidence can be absolute in the colluder and conformer scales. Trapped susceptible followers take the same viewpoint as the toxic leader, or they do not (Krasikova et al., 2013). In ethical studies, trust has a deeper meaning. Trust starts at zero and encompasses the willingness to accept the action, understanding positive outcomes (Lewicki et al., 2006). The people that do not fall on the susceptible follower may have the ability to apply trust properly. Within the available resources, trust has endlessly debatable context outside the scope of this project.

Another study correlated well to the expected emotions associated with susceptible followers. Kish-Gephart et al. used their thirty years of research experience to study unethical behavior inside organizations quantitatively. They determined that self-importance, self-gain, and self-preservation create an environment conducive to misbehaving organizations (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Susceptible organizations (bad barrels) with moral issues (bad cases) hire poor teammates (bad apples) (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Their meta-analysis of literature found that low-job satisfaction correlated with unethical decisions despite the presence of a code of conduct (that loses potency) allowing toxicity to grow. Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) agreed and added that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are the same things, despite the possibility that both unethical and ethical people in the same environment may put customers' needs ahead of their own (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

A component of job-satisfaction discussion and the willingness to overlook toxic behavior to help others should include Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). Essentially employees that are happy to go beyond expected job requirements to help the organization navigate uncertainty display OCB. Two hundred twenty-three business school students participated in a study hypothesized to prove leaders use positive employee behavior to act unethically (Ahmad et al., 2020). A critical point in the framework was the assertion that leaders should feel good about taking credit for follower OCB. (Ahmad et al., 2020). One must acknowledge such a suggestion perfectly aligns with conformers accepting the leader's authority (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Milosevic et al., 2020; McGrandle, 2019). Even so, the idea that employees will overlook toxic behavior to advance the mission and values of the organization supports the idea that another follower exists. People with a deep connection to their job stay and strive for righteousness.

Righteousness and job satisfaction – the emotions and attitudes related to work (Bakkal et al., 2019) - help combat toxicity, while job-related positive effects mediate the self-absorbing behavior of colluders (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). At one point, people were thought to unfollow poor leaders (Milosevic et al., 2020), but other research found employees use their skills to work around leadership. Even though working around leadership may come back to haunt the followers, they sometimes create relationships with the leaders, superiors, mainly when outcomes are unavoidable (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Therefore, one could construe that conspiring against a leader in any format subjects followers to the susceptible categories.

Exercising case study methodology, one research team tested the notion that people feel powerless when isolated from each other (Milosevic et al., 2019). Learning new techniques to

overcome toxicity and a chance to use them allowed employees to methodically validate issues

and overcome toxicity (Milosevic et al., 2019), supported by (Lipman-Blumen) who suggested

accountability relies more on the decision-making process and less on the outcome (2005).

Checks and balances. Padilla et al. suggested that the absence of checks and balances

cultivates a toxic environment process with the follower sharing the blame. Leaders develop their

manipulative power because followers lack the enthusiasm to stop the leader (Padilla et al.,

2007). Not caring if the leader hurts the organization is both an upward and downward motion. If

the leaders' superiors are unaware of problems, or if the leader helped created the structure

above, the likelihood someone holds the leader accountable diminishes (Thoroughgood, 2013;

Beightel, 2018). If an organization were to maintain a checks and balances system even with

toxic leadership, it could remove the change barrier installed by the toxic leader (Neves &

Schyns, 2016). The findings suggest someone becomes the change agent from the inside.

Literature Review Summary

Improving toxic leadership is not simply fixing poor attitudes because it is a legitimate

although damaging leadership style. Toxic leadership remains (relatively) new to the research

venue and often draws comparison to similar behavioral applications such as narcissism.

Narcissism communicates more to clinical diagnosis and individuality. Toxic leadership exists

inside a high tolerance continuous system. Research continues to develop ways to identify and

eradicate toxic leadership but still needs work. Toxic followers are as impactful as toxic leaders

and most passively assimilate as part of the toxic environment (Hoption et al., 2012). However,

another follower with a higher sense of purpose can survive toxic leadership and model the

desired behavior providing reasonable hope for other employees.

Discussion and Implications

The literature review identified toxic leadership as a style rooted in many of the characteristics of destructive leadership. Destructive leadership, the environment, and susceptible followers connect to form a system that relies on all the components to function. One significant difference was how toxic the leader values the organization. Research suggested that a destructive leader will leave nothing savable behind the organization and not hide their faults. On the other hand, the toxic leader uses the organization to hide their flaws.

The toxic leader also uses the organization as a place to consolidate power. They will use the environment to exaggerate their value to the organization. Researchers also found that all stakeholders are affected by how the toxic leader uses the organization but to varying degrees. Toxic leaders will also deflect the consequences of their actions by manipulating their superiors by helping place people in positions above that will collude with the toxic leader.

The consequences of toxic leadership include financial harm to the organization. Followers leave toxic organizations requiring time and money to hire and develop employees. Turnover can happen quickly or slowly depending on the follower's relationship to the leader.

In the toxic system, followers generally collude or conform with the toxic leader. Existing literature indicates the colluders as the people that stay in the toxic environment to enable the toxic leader or hope for the job. The conformer appears as a group that suggests the possibility of another follower type. Unmet needs are one of the primary reasons people conform to bad leadership. They need their job so they will concede to the leaders' agenda. However, the literature suggested conformers can evaluate the leader's actions and their situation.

The possibility that the conformer group may have a subcategory includes literature indicating an organization can overcome toxic leadership from the inside. Colluders are not likely to break the toxic cycle because they view the leader as a role model. But conformers, once their basic needs are met, can gain enough confidence through professional development, job satisfaction, ethical behavior, and a connection to their career. Some researchers developed scales to help organizations detect toxic tendencies, but few studied how to fix toxicity from the inside.

My experience in a toxic environment led me to investigate that not all followers fall in either the colluder or conformer categories. Frankly, working in a toxic environment cast doubt over my ability. People often question why I stay in a visibly toxic organization. Sometimes I wondered why and considered that I might be as toxic as my superiors. Applying the Padilla et al. model to my situation, I propose the exploring the conformer category from different approaches may close the gap of missing followers. Like many of the studies I found, I passively conformed to toxic leaders when I started my career. I feared losing my job more than I feared the leader. I was the only financial provider for my family, so I was willing to conform to keep my job. But as the literature review indicates, people can choose not to follow a toxic leader. Like me, some people in an organization love their work, not necessarily where they work. Therefore, they concentrate on their work and pay little attention to the toxic leader and colluders. Also, professional development builds self-esteem and helps identify ways out of passive conformity. Modeling the desired behavior also helps cope with toxic environments. Also, my experience aligns with literature that shows a connection to a career and not to the leader helps maintain righteousness and contribute to a checks and balances system that can

overcome toxic leadership. Initially, I wanted to call myself and the people like me survivors but could not. One reason is that in a toxic organization, everyone survives, including the leader.

Subcategorizing conformers might also help organizations and the people labeled as toxic. Organizations could potentially reduce turnover, reduce health insurance costs, and increase productivity, saving money and increasing longevity. For the workers, a new subcategory could provide a substantial mental boost for someone unfairly labeled as toxic, hopeless, or a lost soul, with no motivation and only mischievous intent. Overall, validating a subcategory of conformers might be a significant paradigm shift. Figure Three is a conceptual model adapted from the toxic triangle showing the known aspects of the toxic triangle with a new addition to the susceptible follower category
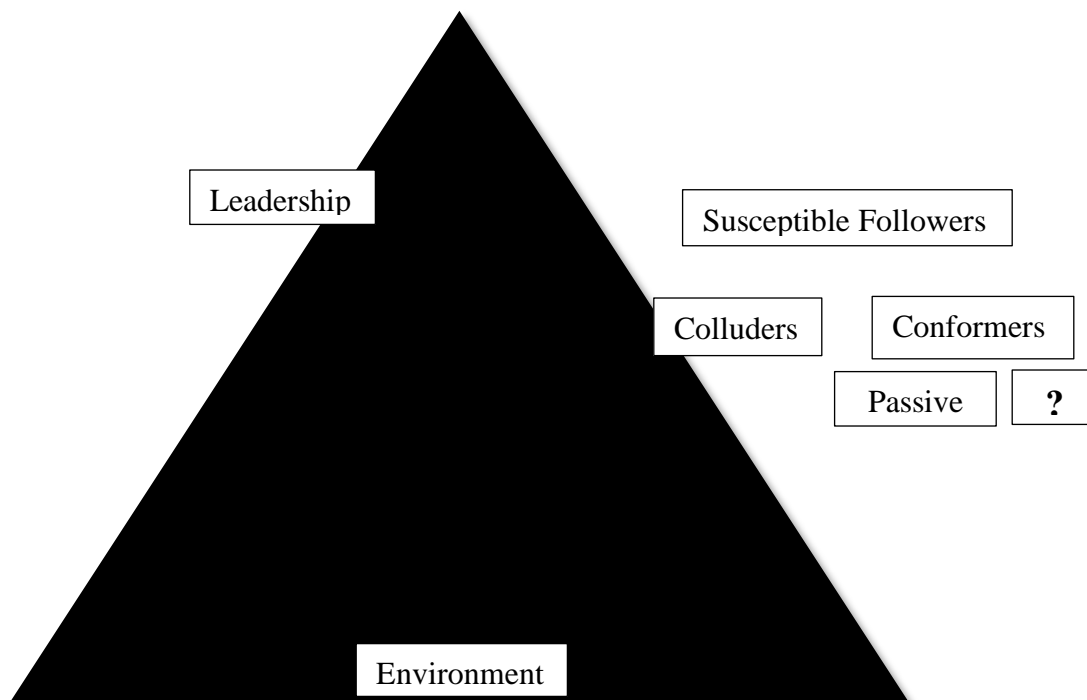
Figure Three: Conceptual Model adapted from Padilla, A. B., Hogan, R. B., & Kaiser, R. B. (2007). The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conductive environments. The Leadership Quarterly, 18, 176-194. doi:10.1.1.322.4077&rep =rep1&type=pdf

Limitations

First, I acknowledge that many years of operating in a toxic organization may introduce bias in this paper. Also, I acknowledge that bias may appear in the available resources. I noted that many studies were conducted using university students in some capacity or only using limited employees of a handful of disciplines. University students, faculty, and administration likely know toxic leadership and subconsciously apply unconscious bias to life experience examples. Military personnel used in other studies have agreed upon exposure to toxic leadership affording a knowledge base about the topic. Further, as a note in one of the studies, military personnel do not always have an opportunity to leave because of signing commitments or deployment status. Many of the literature sources also acknowledged the limited job discipline research applied to toxic leadership.

Conclusion

Susceptible followers exist in the toxic triangle model with two current categories—grouping individuals either as colluders or conformers. One can doubt the existence of only two categories considering the newness of the scales designed to define both. Based on the available literature, followers that believe in their work more than their leader, have moral grounding, or use their education and training as a source of confidence indicate that people can operate in a different conformer context. Current literature offered some behaviors and characteristics but did little exploration specifically to the susceptible follower scales. While this literature review meta-analysis did not prove the existence of conformer subcategories, either way, it did identify gaps in the research that at least hint at the possibility. I presented a conceptual model that places

conformers in two subcategories, hopefully stimulating research approaches that could change

the toxic triangle paradigm and give the forgotten followers a chance.

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