Willie Fortes, right, and Briza Covarrubias, left, humiliate actress Cassandra Babcock who plays sexually assaulted victim during skit performed by Pure Praxis group aboard Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, November 4, 2015 (U.S. Marine Corps/Jonathan E. LopezCruet)

Toxic Culture
Enabling Incivility in the U.S. Military and What to Do About It

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Core values are the heart and soul of U.S. military Services and their cultures. Military organizational, strategic, operational, and tactical strength lies in the degree to which the Services' systems, processes, and behaviors of personnel align with their stated core values, the collective practice of which creates organizational culture. Yet even with the emphasis on core values such as respect and selfless service, the Department of Defense (DOD) continues to experience toxic and counterproductive behaviors that sabotage culture and values, as well as performance, productivity, force protection, health, readiness, and actions of personnel.[1] Although DOD has not conducted comprehensive research on toxic behavior, there is extensive private-sector research regarding the impact, cost, tolerance, enabling, and reduction of toxicity. This article applies private-sector research to assess DOD policies and practices and to recommend courses of action. Although the implications and cost of toxicity are beyond the scope of this article, a brief discussion is relevant for demonstrating its significance. Private-sector research has identified relationships between toxic behaviors and adverse effects on mental and physical health (including suicide, stress-related illness, and post-

traumatic stress), increasing demands on an already overburdened healthcare system; job satisfaction and commitment; individual and collective performance (cognition and collaboration); employee turnover; and the creation of an organizational culture that tolerates other inappropriate behaviors including sexual harassment and discrimination.[2] In addition to the impact on direct targets of toxicity, research has identified the transmission of adverse effects to bystanders and family members.[3]

Private-sector research has also associated toxicity with the monetary costs of medical care, legal representation, personnel replacement and training, lost man-hours due to leaders addressing toxic behavior, complaint investigations, absenteeism, decreased performance of targets and bystanders, avoidance of the toxic person, time spent job searching, and wasted resources.[4] The monetary cost to DOD could be upward of $4.7 billion, or 8 percent of the 2016 DOD budget,[5] calculated by a model assessing the rate of private-sector personnel who experience toxicity (10 to 16 percent[6]) and a cost per case ($23,000 to $32,000, considering inflation[7]), and full-time civilian and military personnel strength (734,000 and 1.3 million respectively[8]). The purposes of this article are to discuss how toxicity and incivility are tolerated and enabled within DOD and to provide recommendations for addressing these effects.

Defining and Detecting Toxicity

Since the terms *toxic personnel*, *toxic leadership*, and *toxic workplace* are used loosely to describe a wide range of behaviors, it is important to define the construct. For the purposes of this article, *toxicity* refers to a pattern of combined, counterproductive behaviors encompassing not only harmful leadership but also abusive supervision, bullying, and workplace incivility, involving leaders, peers, and direct reports as offenders, incorporating six specific behaviors (see table): shaming, passive hostility, team sabotage, indifference, negativity, and exploitation.[9] These elements indicate a clear but often covert pattern of abuse, disrespect, and control

of others, either aggressively or passively, in the name of high performance on the surface, but with the goal of self-advancement, resulting in the sabotage of interpersonal and organizational trust.

Toxic personnel are experts in managing upward, simultaneously giving the appearance of high performance to their supervisors while abusing others to get ahead.[10] In other words, they kiss up and kick down. A common misconception is defining a toxic person as explosive and verbally abusive, when in fact most toxic behavior is passive and "under the radar."[11] Therefore, detection involves observing the wake of wasted resources and demoralized workers left by toxic personnel. Signs of toxicity include a change in climate when the toxic person is present and consistently unproductive meetings as the toxic person sabotages the process to remain the center of attention and maintain his or her narcissistic self-validation. Robert Sutton suggests two tests for detecting toxic people: first, after interacting with the person, do you have a feeling of oppression or humiliation? And second, does the alleged toxic person focus his or her toxicity on "targets" who are less powerful?[12]

Because toxic personnel excel in presenting a positive appearance, effective detection requires leaders first to accept the reality of toxic personnel in their organizations, not assuming all is well; and second, to collect data from a variety of sources and levels of the organization—peers, direct reports, stakeholders, and customers.

How DOD Enables Toxicity

An organization experiences toxicity because its culture, policies, and systems create the conditions for tolerating and enabling uncivil behaviors. Like a garden, which requires nutrient-rich soil free from weeds, as well as water, light, air, and a caretaker to thrive, a high-performing organization requires such elements as trust, respect, effective communication, efficient processes and systems, and leaders who create the conditions for productivity. Typically, an organization identifies the problem only as the toxic individual, overlooking

the environmental factors in its culture, policies, and systems that are creating the conditions for the toxicity to flourish.[13] This is like a gardener failing to prepare the soil in advance of planting by removing all rocks and unwanted vegetation, only later to pull weeds one by one. Within DOD, what are the rocks and weeds—the factors that create a toxic culture?

Leaders often take a strong stance against incivility yet respond to allegations of workplace toxicity with surprise, denial, excuses, and disbelief. Toxic personnel are frequently highly competent, dedicated to task accomplishment, possess skills or expertise needed by the organization, and at least appear to be productive in the short term. Leaders, assuming the organization is healthy, either disbelieve or are unaware that someone could be so malevolent toward others when he or she appears so dedicated.[14] Most toxic personnel are experts in presenting an image of high performance to their superiors. While toxic personnel may be productive, they simultaneously create "a trust tax" that debits from results.[15]

A leader may be aware of but willing to tolerate toxic behaviors due to the personal or professional benefits resulting from the toxic person's short-term factual or perceived productivity. *Toxic protectors* practice a subtle form of quid pro quo, either having a personal relationship with the toxic person, having a need for power and control that the toxic person's actions feed, or benefiting from apparent high performance. Alternatively, the toxic person may exploit the relationship with the protector to advance a personal agenda. Sadly, "protectors do not protect an organization from the tragic human or bottom-line costs of toxicity. In fact, they prolong the situation by making it difficult for others who have the authority to take action."[16] Toxic protectors sabotage the organization by ignoring or enabling behaviors that degrade productivity, morale, trust, and cohesion.

Many times, an organization does not know how to deal with a toxic person and either reassigns or isolates and reallocates the toxic person's responsibilities to other, already overworked personnel,

Table. Criteria, Description, and Examples of Toxic Behavior

Type of Behavior	Description	Observable Behaviors
Shaming	Humiliation, sarcasm, put-downs, jabs, blaming	Persistently pointing out mistakes intending to reduce another's self-worth Public embarrassment
Passive hostility	Passive-aggressive behavior redirecting one's anger inappropriately on a target person or persons	Resenting requests, deliberate procrastination, and intentional mistakes to avoid serving others Complaints of injustice and lack of appreciation Compliments that veil criticism Always getting in the last word (punch)
Team sabotage	Meddling to establish one's personal power base, resulting in decreased cohesion and performance	Inconsistency: unclear, constantly changing expectations and unpredictable policies, procedures, and behaviors Dysfunctional communication: in order to maintain power and control, withholding key information, sharing incomplete information, or sharing partial items of information resulting in each person having incomplete data
Indifference	An apparent lack of regard for the welfare of others, especially subordinates	Lack of compassion and empathy Excluding certain people Disinterested in the successes and unsympathetic to the suffering of others
Negativity	A corrosive interpersonal style that has a negative impact on individual and collective morale and motivation	Malice: cruelty and degradation are more prevalent than kindness Narcissism: uncaring abuse of others for personal gain
Exploitation	The perception of getting ahead at the expense of others	Inequality: tolerating toxic people, who are often highly skilled, but punishing others Favoritism: special treatment for a select few Nepotism: hiring unqualified friends or family Taking credit for other's results and accomplishments

Sources: Paul White, "5 Ways to Tell If Your Workplace Is Really Toxic," December 23, 2014, available at <www.entrepreneur.com/article/241132>; Bruna Martinuzzi, "7 Signs You're Working in a Toxic Office," August 16, 2013, available at <www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/openforum/articles/7-signs-youre-working-in-a-toxic-office/>.

none of which actions address the behavior.[17] Or, as is often the case, the toxic person is left in place and the targeted person is reassigned out of the toxic situation. As a result, the toxic person is not held accountable for counterproductive behavior, which is then passed around the organization. Another response is promoting the toxic person just to move him or her out, which justifies and reinforces the behavior. The failure to address toxic behavior creates resentment and frustration among other personnel.

In toxic organizations, the value of "getting results" becomes the priority, superseding core values. For example, performance metrics are useful in organizations characterized by trust and respect. However, in organizations characterized by toxicity and incivility, metrics become oppressive and prescriptive as personnel often adjust statistics to present the appearance of productivity and to avoid becoming targets of hostility.[18]

Organizational downsizing is associated with increased abusive supervision to maintain productivity, including manipulation, coercion, and threats.[19] Leaders, amid downsizing, tend to be frustrated by increased requirements and decreased resources and, being unable to express it to their supervisors, redirect their frustration toward direct reports.[20] In DOD, values such as duty, loyalty, and honor reinforce tolerating toxicity to fulfill mission accomplishment. Exhortations of "failure is not an option," "do more with less," and "I don't care how you do it, just get it done" tend to fuel toxic behaviors. In the era of DOD downsizing, delayering, and budget cuts, the merging of roles and expansion of span of control are common, with apparently little or no consideration given to streamlining processes and extending timelines. The combination of factors such as the pressure to produce, uncertainty, submissiveness, downsizing, abuse, and lack of peer support results in decreased motivation for individual and collective effort.[21]

In DOD, both military and civilian merit-based evaluation systems emphasize performance-based achievement. Although values are included in varying degrees on each department's military and civilian evaluations, the achievement of results determines the individual's rating, with little emphasis on values-based behavior, treatment of others, and how results are obtained. According to information shared with the author by over 25 GS-15 and O-6 supervisors, this absence of values-based feedback may be due to supervisors being either unaware of how to include values in performance counseling and evaluations, or fearful of grievances.

Since evaluations provide primary information to board members, de-emphasizing values affects selections for promotion and key assignments. The ends of getting results and being promoted justify the toxic means. Also problematic is that in a zero-defects, highly competitive promotion system, any marginally negative entry could influence selection, resulting in values becoming an affirmative, literal "check the block" on evaluations. This reinforces toxic behavior, as toxic personnel are promoted and selected through the system and mistreat others along the way. Military lore is replete with examples of toxic senior leaders who were promoted through a results-driven system and thereby enabled to abuse others.[22]

Chief selects run in formation during Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training 5k run on flight deck of aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, August 17, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Alex Perlman)

A results-driven culture in a downsizing organization that overemphasizes productivity and tolerates toxic behavior without accountability creates the conditions for toxicity, diminished readiness, and waste. Toxic people undermine productivity, organizations allow mediocrity, and targets of toxicity develop survival techniques, all of which drain energy and resources. Current private-sector research has identified several actions that DOD could implement or improve to address the problem of toxicity.

How to Detox and Create a Culture of Respect

Since a cultural status quo produced by the combination of multiple toxic factors is difficult to change, effective detox requires a systems approach, implementing and integrating multiple actions at each organizational level to reinforce respectful engagement.[23]

Respectful engagement is "treating each individual with dignity and fairness, with the operational premise that you treat others in concert with the way you would like to be treated."[24] It involves behavioral norms of authenticity, affirmation, attentive listening, transparency, open communication, trust, and mutual support. Also, successful change requires focusing on the enabling conditions and not narrowly on the toxic individual whose ingrained behavior is reinforced by a results-rewarding system that tolerates toxicity. How do leaders prepare the soil, remove the rocks and weeds, and nourish the plants of organizational culture? The answer is to feed and reinforce the culture, confront toxic personnel and those who protect them, and teach leaders to create a culture of respectful engagement.

Creating the conditions for productivity involves aligning and reinforcing the organization's core values, which provide the principles and standards for norms and practices.[25] Core values are the key nutrients for organizational culture and must permeate the organization's daily activities—formal and informal discussions and meetings, decisionmaking, systems, processes, and performance.

The culture should create the expectation that all personnel practice the core values, not permitting anyone in authority to abuse the standards they are responsible for supporting. It is insufficient merely to create a list of values assuming the desired culture will automatically follow. Values must be communicated regularly and in a variety of ways, since, as research shows, "toxicity will be significantly reduced in organizations that clearly define values in concrete ways, identify the kinds of behaviors the organization will and will not tolerate, and have a clear set of

consequences when an individual does not live up to the values. Of course, the leader must model these behaviors as well."[26] Enduring culture change requires leaders at each level to clarify acceptable and unacceptable behaviors by translating and operationalizing the department's values for their specific organization, by enacting policies of universal accountability, and by reinforcement. Former Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter emphasized this clarification and his expectation that

leaders at every level of the Department [should] *engage personally with their subordinates in both formal and informal discussion about values-based decision-making . . . as a part of their official duties. These values include, among others, honesty, integrity, loyalty, accountability for actions and decisions, fairness and impartiality, respect, and responsible citizenship. Importantly, this engagement must begin with top leaders and cascade down to each subordinate organization's leader. Leaders at all levels must foster a culture of ethics with their organizations by setting the example in their own conduct and by making values-based decision-making central to all aspects of the Department's activities.*[27]

Effective clarification involves regular, continuing dialogue on the meaning and practice of core values related to such items as communication (including email), collaboration, addressing failure, correcting mistakes, giving praise, acknowledging achievement, customer service, decisionmaking, ambiguity, goal setting, and respect for diversity. Leaders must ask, "What does respect (or honor, integrity, and so on) mean in how we communicate (or collaborate, correct mistakes, and so on) with each other?" Then, to determine the extent of clarification, leaders should have informal conversations with personnel throughout the organization and collect feedback from customer and stakeholders.

Performance feedback that includes details on not only what personnel have done but also how they get it done is extremely effective in reinforcing the organization's core values.[28] One

suggestion is that evaluations consist of 60 percent competence and 40 percent values.[29] Since workplace relationships are a key factor in job satisfaction, retention, and performance, initial and subsequent performance counseling should establish a clear relationship between values-based behavior and its effect, either favorable or adverse, on team performance. In other words, personnel must hear how their behavior is consistent or inconsistent with organizational values and how they either empower or sabotage the organization.

Confront Toxic Personnel and Their Protectors
A gardener who observes weeds, pests, or disease must take immediate action so that the undesirable elements do not grow, multiply, and exploit the plants and their nutrients. In the same way, leaders must take immediate action using a variety of individual, collective, and organizational interventions.

A 360-degree assessment, whether mandatory or optional, is valuable for increasing self-awareness, developing personnel, and identifying toxic behavior.[30] Its effectiveness for influencing change could be increased by three actions: the rater or senior rater could select respondents to provide unbiased feedback; the feedback should be used in values-based performance counseling; and the feedback should be utilized in a coaching relationship for improved performance.[31] Organizations can also use a 360-degree assessment to identify and address a toxic situation, not for the purpose of obtaining evidence for firing an individual, which can become a tool for retaliation, but for identifying counterproductive behavior and creating a healthy environment.

Most toxic people are unaware of their uncivil behavior and its effects and, when confronted, typically respond with denial or excuses.[32] A change in behavior requires a specific performance improvement plan, also known as *targeted feedback*, focusing on toxic behaviors and effects on individual and collective performance.[33] Targeted feedback involves identifying the problem by respectfully and nonjudgmentally describing the toxic

behavior; implementing a sequential process to target a resolution by clarifying the behavior as a problem; allowing response and discussion; obtaining agreement about the problem, if possible, and brainstorming courses of action; and selecting a course of action with goals and a timeline for regular follow-up. While most people respond positively to feedback, toxic people are resistant, requiring a specific plan and persistent accountability.

Toxic protectors, although often unaware of their actions, protect the toxic person from being exposed and responsible.[34] Leaders at all levels should intervene with toxic protectors by first realizing they exist and are identifiable by the benefits gained from their relationship to a toxic person; second, by discussing with personnel their collective performance, work relationships, and climate assessments, carefully analyzing the information for toxic behaviors; third, by discussing with personnel toxic themes and patterns; and fourth, if a protector is identified, by confronting him or her using targeted feedback.

Provide Training in Respectful Engagement
The focus of professional military education and organization-sponsored professional development is primarily on developing technical skills and competencies. Leaders also need skills in creating an organizational culture that reinforces values, norms, and trust, and in confronting toxic behavior.[35] Values-based experiential methods that incorporate role-playing, active listening, conflict resolution, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, stress management, and discussion of dilemmas are effective methods of teaching respectful engagement, as contrasted with ineffective information-based instruction.[36] One-fourth of public-sector workers attributed their incivility to "not knowing any better" and to a lack of organizational training in respectful treatment.[37] An excellent example of values-based training is the U.S. Army 3rd Infantry Division's sexual assault prevention program, "Bystander

Airman shares his experience being in toxic work environment at Storytellers event on Ramstein Air Base, Germany, February 23, 2017 (U.S. Air Force/Savannah L. Waters)

Intervention," in which Soldiers engage scenarios to translate the Army core values into norms, develop ownership, and wrestle with values-based action. The program's premise is that individual behavior to intervene is influenced by organizational culture of respect and trust, not extensive information.

Additional effective methods merit mentioning, including a clear process for redress that balances confidentiality and protections for the complainant and the alleged offender; professional leadership coaching; screening job applicants for values-based behaviors[38] and conducting exit interviews with departing personnel[39]; and termination as a last resort after adequate opportunity for change.[40] The main effort of detox should be creating a culture of respectful engagement that prevents toxicity from flourishing.

A culture characterized by core values does not happen automatically and without significant reinforcement and vigilance. Since most toxic personnel are highly intelligent and skilled,

appear to be productive, and excel in managing upward, leaders should not simply assume the culture is healthy. Organizational toxicity is increasing in the civilian sector, and it seems that the Department of Defense is not immune to similar factors and forces that are causing this increase.[41] If the military Services do not act, there will be continuing waste, declining productivity, an adverse effect on personnel, and decreased readiness. However, if the military implements the strategies for respectful engagement, leaders could expect increased readiness, productivity, performance, motivation, and a healthy environment. Future mission command will require high levels of trust among personnel due to an increased characterization of smaller and lighter units and the prevalence of cyber warfare.[42] Since toxicity sabotages cohesion, trust, and performance, the success of future mission command depends on addressing the toxic elements in our military organizations. **JFQ**

Notes

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