Managing toxic leaders: Dysfunctional patterns in organizational leadership and how to deal with them

Marco Tavanti

Abstract
This study reviews different typologies of toxic leaders in organizations—from bullies to narcissistic leaders. Unfortunately, toxic leaders are a painful but common reality in many organizations. Their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal characteristics often generate enduring poisonous effects on those they lead. They are identified by selfish outcomes in their decision-making and how they leave subordinates worse off than when they began. What distinguishes excellent from average managers is their ability to effectively manage dysfunctional leaders in the workplace. Even though some organizations may promote or simply tolerate toxic leaders for economic or political reasons, the long-term impact on the company’s mission and reputation is often underestimated. The author suggests some effective coping strategies to identify, address, and transform toxic leaders and workplaces.

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Leadership matters. History is graced with examples of transformative leaders – leaders who elevated the aspirations of their followers, inspired their vision, and harnessed their collective will to achieve common goals that would have otherwise been unattainable. Gardner and Laskin (2011) provided profiles of exemplary leadership by persons operating in very different fields of endeavor and by employing very different means of influence. In addition, research on why organizations continue to have to deal with toxic leadership is reviewed. Toxic Leadership Defined The term “toxic leader” first appeared in 1996 (Wicker, 1996), but as yet no standard definition of toxic leadership exists. Indeed, a variety of terms that refer to the same phenomenon can be found in the literature.