

## Featured Publication & Special Members Only Downloadable Chapter

ILA Members publish on the topic of leadership from a variety of perspectives. We are pleased to feature a selection of these publications in this newsletter and our website.

In the member connector, authors take you behind the scenes, sharing their perspectives on the work, how the work informs contemporary issues, and highlighting points of interest to ILA members.

Thanks to ILA member Jean Lipman-Blumen for contributing to this issue. Visit the member area of the ILA Web site to find additional information on *The Allure of Toxic Leaders - Why We follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians and How We Can Survive Them* and download Chapter 1 “Toxic Leaders: They’re Plentiful” -- available only to ILA members.

If you have a recent publication and are interested in being featured in this column, please contact Debra DeRuyver, ILA membership services, at [ila@ila-net.org](mailto:ila@ila-net.org) or 310.405.5218.



## Featured Publication *The Allure of Toxic Leaders -*

*Why We follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians and How We Can Survive Them*

by Jean Lipman-Blumen  
(OXFORD University Press, 2004)

ILA Staff, Debra DeRuyver:

**What is your definition of a Toxic Leader? How do we recognize them?**

Jean Lipman-Blumen:

A toxic leader is somebody who has a poisonous effect on the people or the organization that they lead. By dint of their destructive behavior and dysfunctional personal characteristics, they generate a serious, and I'd say enduring, poisonous effect on the individuals, groups, and organizations that they lead. They leave us worse off than they found us.

There are many characteristics of toxic leaders. Intentionality is one. The intent to harm

others or do something at the expense of others really distinguishes serious toxic leaders from merely careless or unintentionally toxic leaders. Lack of integrity is also high on the list, as are cynicism, untrustworthiness, hypocrisy, and corruption. Insatiable ambition that pushes leaders to put their own well being and power and glory above the well being of their followers is another telltale sign.

Arrogance is still another trait. Arrogance is important because it prevents individual toxic leaders from recognizing their mistakes, and, therefore, they can't correct them. Related to this is an enormous ego

that blinds toxic leaders to their shortcomings— not just mistakes— but shortcomings, which then makes it difficult for them to engage in self-renewal.

Even more problematical is the problem of amorality. Many toxic leaders can't discern right from wrong. Avarice and greed: these make leaders put money high up on their list of things they desire. Another characteristic of toxic leaders is their reckless disregard for the consequences of their actions to others, as well as to themselves.

The last two characteristics of toxic leaders are more at the unintentional end of toxic leadership; these are

4.

cowardice— which prevents them from making difficult choices or taking difficult actions— and sheer incompetence—the failure to understand the true nature of the problem confronting them and their subsequent inability to act effectively.

Those are just the qualities of character. When you think about their behavior, toxic leaders are frequently deliberately demeaning, disenfranchising, demoralizing and intimidating toward their followers. They try to incapacitate them. In political situations, we're talking about imprisoning, torturing, and killing their followers and frequently their non-followers, too.

One of the ways in which toxic leaders seduce us is that they constantly feed us illusions that make us believe that they are all powerful and that we are quite inept compared to them. We followers feel the need to rely on them, thus undermining our ability to act independently. There's a lot that toxic leaders do: They stifle criticism, lie, misdiagnose problems, and subvert the structures and processes that were put in place to protect truth and justice and excellence. In doing so, they frequently engage in unethical and illegal and sometimes even criminal acts. Another thing

toxic leaders do is identify scapegoats and incite others to punish and blame these scapegoats.

There is still another way to recognize toxic leaders: In many instances, they structure the cost of overthrowing them in such a way that, if they were to be overthrown, it would lead to the loss of the entire system. We've seen this in the corporate world, where, if a CEO were to be fired, the organization would have to pay him or her such a high fee that the entire company would be put into bankruptcy. So the choice is to stick with the toxic leader or allow the whole organization to disintegrate.

**With all of these obvious signs of toxic leadership, why do we still follow them?**

That was THE question. That was my burning question when I started the book. I couldn't understand why. Why, when we can clearly recognize them, why do we keep following them? I think the answer is quite complex, but a major part of that answer may be found in our very deep psychological and existential needs to which these leaders speak.

I think there are at least five psychological needs that can prompt us to follow toxic leaders. First, we have a need for a reassuring authority figure to replace our parents. Second, we have a need to feel special,

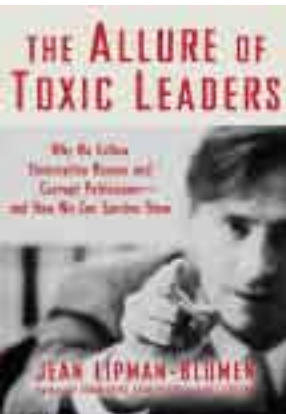
to feel that we belong to an elite of some kind. Third, we have a need to feel membership in the human community. Fourth, we have a need to avoid ostracism and isolation, that is, social death. Fifth, we feel that we are not strong enough as single individuals to challenge a bad leader.

Then, there are deeper existential reasons that come from simply being human. And the most important of these is our fear of death and our desire to live on forever. Most of us know we can't live on forever in a physical sense, but we can

live on forever symbolically, that is, in the minds of future generations. That means we want immortality. And immortality usually means doing something heroic or memorable for which we will be remembered.

One of the ways in which toxic leaders seduce us is that they constantly feed us illusions that make us believe that they are all powerful and that we are quite inept compared to them.

Consequently, we are susceptible to anyone who promises to keep us safe from danger and death and who also shows us the way to immortality. One way to achieve immortality is by doing something heroic. This is related to our existential need to identify with a noble vision, so that we feel we are doing something worthwhile with our lives. We like leaders with visions. Another aspect of our existential needs involves the yearning to be at the center of



things, where leaders congregate and important decisions are made.

Take that whole bundle of complex psychological needs and existential anxieties and wrap them up in an individual who lives in a world of uncertainty, technological accidents, socio-political catastrophes, and unsettling personal incidents and you have much of the recipe for tolerating toxic leaders. Each society has norms that define what a leader should be, as well as standardized ways by which members of that society can measure individual achievement and self-worth. We all would like to be heroes and do something remarkable. That leads to immortality. And, if we can't be heroic by the standards of our own society, then we are more likely to be vulnerable to toxic leaders who typically say, "I will be heroic for you, and if you join my enterprise, I will keep you safe. Some of my heroism will rub off on you. So, you will vicariously become immortal and heroic, too."

**Are we more vulnerable today in the U.S. than people in other countries or in other eras?**

There's always change. Change is the one constant, but the rate of change is different at different periods. Right now, we're living in a period of accelerated change. During periods of change, crisis, and instability, people tend to look for safety. In such periods, we

look to other people and leaders, divine or human, for safety. We turn to gods and pray that we'll be kept safe. We're also more likely to put ourselves in the hands of humans who make the unfulfillable promise to keep us safe.

The irreducible nub that will never go away is that we will all die eventually. The only uncertainty about our death is how and when and under what conditions it will occur. So, we want somebody who will reassure us that they can take care of us. We push our anxiety down into our unconscious where, unbeknownst to us, it settles into the driver's seat and makes us more vulnerable to toxic leaders.

**Most of your examples of toxic leadership in the book are men. Do you think male leaders are more likely to become toxic or are they more likely to be accepted as toxic leaders than their female counterparts?**

I think it's more about the tolerance of male toxic leaders versus female toxic leaders. There are plenty of female toxic leaders, but I think we tend to be more tolerant of male toxic leaders. For example, we tolerate anger more in men than we do in women. We tolerate aggression more in men than we

do in women. But I'd like to see more research on that.

**Many of your whistle-blower and/or reformer examples, on the other hand, are women. Are women more likely than men to blow the whistle or try to reform toxic leaders?**

That's an interesting point. I think we need to do more research on that, but just from looking at it in a non-systematic way, women do their fair share of whistleblowing.

One thing to remember about whistleblowers is that most of them endure a lot of misery. Fred Alford has done a study of whistleblowers that discusses this [C. Fred Alford, *Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power*]. Whistleblowing is very courageous, but it also can have quite devastating consequences to the whistleblower. I don't say that to discourage people from being whistleblowers, only to call attention to potential serious consequences.

**Do you think women are more likely to be whistleblowers and reformers because they may be more marginalized in their organizations than their male counterparts?**

That may very well be. That's

During periods of change, crisis, and instability, people tend to look for safety. In such periods, we look to other people and leaders, divine or human, for safety.

6.

a good point because, when you're at the margins of a group, you don't necessarily buy into the group's basic assumptions. When you're at the margins, you see things differently.

**One of the critiques of your book is that you seem to equate people like Adolf Hitler and college basketball coach Bobby Knight. What do you say to criticism along these lines?**

What I'm trying to say is that people have different levels of toxicity. Not all toxic leaders are the same; they vary by degree, by intent, by the frequency with which they act that way. Furthermore, they may be very toxic in one context, but not in another. It is unrealistic to think that toxic leaders come out of a single extremist mold like Hitler. I cite Bobby Knight as a toxic leader because he destroyed players. He threw chairs at them; he cursed at them; he intimidated them. He didn't engage in genocide, but that doesn't mean he wasn't toxic. In the book, I try to give examples of people who were toxic to different degrees and in different ways. And I tried to be careful when I wrote about them. I was conscious of that problem and tried to make those distinctions. Perhaps I didn't make them clearly enough.

**In other words, you're critiquing people who only think of toxic leadership in terms of a Hitler rather than recognizing the toxic**

**leadership all around them.**  
Exactly.

There's another thing we haven't talked about that is very interesting and that is how we tolerate toxic leaders because they are very gifted. Bobby Knight might fall into that category. People thought he was such a gifted coach that they tolerated his behavior.

But I think there are other circumstances in which we forgive people for being toxic. I think we put up with toxic leaders who exude great charisma. We are drawn into the charisma that they project. They are so engaging, so brilliant, and so much fun that we really want to be around them. They bring so much to the organization. Despite the fact that they lie, are corrupt, are stealing, etc., we don't pay attention to that when leaders also contribute so many other things, including this mesmerizing charisma.

**What can we do to resist our need for toxic leaders and/or reform current toxic leaders?**

I have described some strategies for trying to reform them, but frankly, I think it's hard to reform truly toxic leaders. By the time they get to those positions of leadership, they've developed deeply-engrained

patterns of behavior and qualities of character that go back for decades. So, it's quite hard to change them. But there are some strategies that I suggest.

First, you can confront them. But, you need to confront them with a group of other people, not just by yourself, or you'll be in serious danger. So, do your homework and find the other people in the organization who

are willing to stand up with you. I would also suggest that you seek out the opinion leaders to go with you to confront that toxic leader.

Second, sometimes you can offer to counsel the leader. Be sure to set a timetable for future sessions and accountability meetings. Third, you can join with others to oust the leader.

Fourth, you can go above the leader's head, even to the board of directors. Just be sure to do your homework and find out which board members would be responsive to your concerns. Fifth, you can also go to the media. Or, sixth, sometimes the right decision for you might be simply to leave the organization.

Aside from the steps that individuals can take, I also think there are other things that organizations can do to create safeguards against toxic leaders. These are essentially policy options, as distinct

Not all toxic leaders are the same; they vary by degree, by intent, by the frequency with which they act that way.

from individual initiatives. For example, organizations can set term limits for leadership positions. They can design selection processes that are open and transparent, that allow input from people at all levels of the organization. They can practice serious due diligence when hiring someone—find out his or her strengths and weaknesses. They can create respectful departure options, so toxic leaders can be ousted without

turning it into a major crisis for the organization.

We also need to think about drafting people whom we all recognize as being good leaders but who do not necessarily think of themselves as leaders. We don't need to ask these people to give up their lives, just to serve for two or three or five years.

As individuals, we also can

confront our own anxieties, painful as that may be, so that we are not unconsciously driven by them and, instead, we use that energy in more conscious and constructive ways. In the book, I talk about all this much more.

## New ILA Member Directory

8.

The ILA has officially launched its new Online Directory of ILA Members! This online directory is contained within a password protected area of our Web site. Each ILA member will use a unique Login ID and password to login to this area. If you have not yet received your Login ID and password via email, please let us know!

The directory is located at:  
<http://www.ila-net.org/Members/Directory/index.asp>

Over the next few weeks, appropriate links will be made

from the rest of the ILA site to this Login page and all password protected material currently covered under our general Login and PWD will be moved over to this Login system, at which time the general Login and PWD will be permanently discontinued.

Once logged into the directory, you may: Search the directory for other ILA members, Update your Contact Information, Update your membership in ILA's Global Learning Communities, or Add biographical information to your online profile. When you first

sign in, you will also be provided with information on your current renewal date, membership type, and beneficiary information if you are part of an institutional membership.

We hope that you enjoy this new membership benefit!

Questions or Comments can be directed to Debra DeRuyver, ILA Membership Services, [ila@ila-net.org](mailto:ila@ila-net.org) or 301.405.5218.