



**HOW A CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSCEPTIBLE FOLLOWERS  
INFLUENCE TOXIC LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS IN THE AIR FORCE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE TOXIC TRIANGLE THEORY**

THESIS

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Rachael S. Beightel, BS

Captain, USAF

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis was to determine what characteristics of the Air Force's environment and Airmen perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors. This survey study was designed, using the toxic triangle theory, to evaluate the toxic leadership behaviors, susceptible follower traits, and conducive environment characteristics participants have experienced in the Air Force. The study applied ordinary least squares path analysis to determine the influence susceptible followers and characteristics of a conducive environment have on toxic leadership behaviors in the Air Force.

Results revealed that collusive followers have a direct influence on toxic leadership. While only two characteristics of a conducive environment-ethics and absence of checks and balances-influence toxic leadership behavior directly. Furthermore, the mediating model found that two other characteristics of a conducive environment-instability and favoritism- have indirect effect on toxic leadership behaviors through susceptible followers. These findings suggest that leaders of organizations should target creating an environment based on an ethical culture and implementing a system of checks and balances of its unit and leaders. Moreover, leaders should eliminate areas of instability and practices of favoritism to eliminate collusive behaviors from subordinates. Directing focus at these specific elements may put an end to toxic leadership behavior.

**Keywords:** Toxic leader, Toxic triangle theory, Susceptible followers, Conducive environment, Organizational culture, Climate, Airmen, Air Force, Leadership, Ethics, Instability, Favoritism, Absence of check and balances, Abusive, Authoritarian, Narcissism, Self-promotion

*To my parents for believing I could do all this research despite how much time I seemed to be writing. And to my favorite furry, four-legged companion, a special thanks for all the distractions, mud, and fur I could handle during this process. I apologize for all the long walks and runs we had to miss so I could write and research instead. #AFITSquad*

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Rachael S. Beightel

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**I. Introduction**

**Overview**

The concept of leadership is engrained in our culture from childhood. Children play follow the leader while learning how to follow directions and stand in line. In high school, teenagers get the opportunity to become class leaders as presidents of clubs or captains of sports teams. In the military, individuals are trained first to be followers, then developed into leaders. Due to a leader's integral position and status in an organization, scholars have studied for years how and what it takes to become a leader. Yet, people still encounter leaders that behave in a manner contrary to how a "good" leader is expected to act.

Occasionally some of these behaviors will manifest in a toxic manner as leaders are seen ridiculing subordinates, micromanaging, throwing temper tantrums or even a stapler. These toxic behaviors can impact an organization by decreasing morale, productivity, and organizational trust among other consequences. As a result, scholars have begun to study more about toxic leadership behaviors and traits. However, there is less prevailing research looking at toxic leadership as an element of a larger picture.

This chapter will introduce the importance of studying toxic leadership, and the Air Force's environmental and followership traits that tend to perpetuate this type of

leadership. The research problem, and purpose statement as well as an outline of the methodology, are included in this chapter. Finally, the chapter will close with the research assumptions and limitations, as well as potential implications gained through this leadership study.

## **Background**

Leadership is not merely a position given to someone, but an action of leading other people, an organization or a unit towards a specific direction. The impact a toxic leader has on an organization can reach far and wide which can create “lasting and enduring harm to the organization’s culture and climate” (Aubrey, 2012). A toxic leader can be defined as an individual “who by dint of their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal qualities generate serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead” (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Toxic leaders, in the context of the military, add stress to personnel who are already serving in stressful roles. The more time an individual has spent in the military, the higher the chance they have experienced a toxic leader at one point in time.

However, according to the toxic triangle concept (Padilla, et al., 2007) toxic leadership is merely a piece of the puzzle without two contributing pieces: susceptible followers and a conducive environment. Thus, a conducive environment along with susceptible followers enable a toxic leader to thrive. The Toxic Triangle Theory was used as foundation for this research (Padilla, et al., 2007). The triangle illustrates the three critical domains in perpetuating a toxic leader or leadership environment: the leader, the

followers, and the environment. In the case of this study, the Toxic Triangle Theory is observed through a military context to determine whether there are specific environmental and followership characteristics that lead Air Force leaders to become toxic.

### **Problem Statement**

Assuming that toxic leadership is merely a symptom of the root problem, it is suggested that the characteristics of the follower and environment of the Air Force could empower a toxic leader. The behavior and actions of a toxic leader can significantly affect an Airman's job commitment, job satisfaction, and the overall organizational climate (Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015). As a result, toxic leadership impacts the Air Force's number one resource: the Airmen. Negatively affecting the lives of their Airmen, toxic leaders can have an impact on the performance of those individuals and their organization.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to identify the elements of the Air Force's environment and Airmen's followership characteristics that enable toxic behaviors. Specifically, what role might the environmental and followership traits in the Air Force have in perpetuating toxic leadership behaviors?

### **Research Question and Investigative Questions**

The overarching question answered in this research is:

RQ: What environmental and followership elements enable toxic leadership behaviors?

To answer the research question, the following investigative questions (IQ) will help to provide answers to this question:

IQ1: What are the dimensions of toxic leadership?

IQ2: What dimensions form a conducive environment for toxic leadership?

IQ2a: How does a conducive environment influence toxic leadership behavior?

IQ3: What dimensions form to create followers susceptible to toxic leadership?

IQ3a: How does followership influence toxic leadership behavior?

IQ3b: How does the conducive environment influence the susceptible followers?

### **Research Focus**

The research population for this study is any organization that has formal or informal leaders. In order to provide focus, the sample frame will consist of personnel that have worked in different Air Force organizations. The participants for this research were Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) students, faculty and staff. The participants at AFIT provided a general sample of the Air Force, as each individual has both a breadth of experience with several levels of leadership, and diversity in both rank and career field.

### **Methodology**

Chapter III provides details regarding the design of the research. A mixed methods approach was used, with two phases. The research was initiated with three previously-developed scales that measured toxic leadership, environment toxicity, and follower susceptibility within an organization. However, due to the uniqueness of the Air Force as an organization compared to the civilian sector the study was devised to

determine which dimensions of each scale were applicable in a military context. As a result, the first phase employed a qualitative approach in which the opinions and values of a small sample regarding the dimensions of the original scales were ascertained. The participants were organized into three focus groups, where each participant reviewed the three scales and determined the applicability from their own experiences.

Based on the response of the focus groups, it was determined which dimensions could be expunged from each scale. Subsequently, the second phase employed a quantitative method utilizing the reduce scales for a survey study. A survey was presented to students, faculty and staff from AFIT. There were three constructs that the survey sought to measure.

First, experiences with toxic leadership behaviors directed towards individuals and situations were measured utilizing Schmidt's Toxic Leadership Scale (2008). Participants were presented with a prompt in which they determined how likely it is they have experienced such a behavior or situation from their present or prior supervisor, all items were assessed on a 7-point, Likert-type scale. Second, the survey utilized a tailored version of the Alvarado Work Environment Scale of Toxicity (AWEST) to determine which conducive environment traits can be found Air Force units (2016). Third, experiences with peers and co-workers were measured by presenting fictional scenarios of an individual displaying certain personality trait, from Thoroughgood's Conformer and Colluder scales, to determine the predominant personality traits of the organization's followers (2013). Results were analyzed through regression and confirmatory factor analysis measures.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

Specific to IQ1, this research assumes the participants understand what behaviors of a leader are unacceptable or have been informed about what constitutes unacceptable and destructive leadership behaviors. It is also assumed that participants were honest and logical in regards to all the questions on the survey, and that they were not answered based on the best-looking choice.

## **Implications**

Toxic leaders are known to exist in both civilian and military organizations. Studies have verified their presence and alluded to the environments in which they thrive. However, little has been studied as to what characteristics of an environment or follower perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors. This study will examine the relationships between these three dimensions.

Identifying the characteristics of the military's environment and Airmen that contribute to displays of toxic leadership behaviors, organizations or areas that struggle with a predisposition of toxic leaders can be pin-pointed. Moreover, this research can help to inform organizational stakeholders looking to mitigate the toxic leadership.

## II. Literature Review

### Overview

Military leadership studies date back to the 1970's, one in particular was conducted by the Army following the Vietnam War (Illi, 1973). The U.S. Army was transitioning from a need to draft service members into an all-volunteer service, thus changing the leadership and group dynamics of the service. As a result, the Army wanted to determine the best type of leadership appropriate for the new dynamic. Since this time there have been multiple studies on leadership, in both the military and civilian sector. Most of these studies have focused on the making of a leader with questions such as: "How to be a leader" and "What makes a good leader?"

Starting in the 90's, studies started to focus on the dark side of leadership by honing in on negative types of leadership and behaviors in the workforce. Moreover, there is still much to be gleaned from in terms of negative leadership styles and their consequences. Due to the military's organizational structure that was developed with a command structure in mind, leadership is crucial to the military's vitality and success. Therefore, the various services have begun to dig deeper in their academic knowledge of negative leadership and how it affects their units.

The consequences of negative leadership, such as those styles that will be discussed in this study, can impact an organizational unit's effectiveness, turnover, morale, and employees. A 2016 retention study suggested that poor leadership was the reason for 36 percent of the maintenance officers interviewed to leave (Barkalow, 2016). Half of the responses alluded to toxic behaviors displayed by a superior. Experience with an abusive or toxic leader has left subordinates and units with low cohesion and trust.

Moreover, these experiences can cause work-family conflict as well as increased psychological distress. These consequences left to grow within a military unit experiencing a toxic leader can inhibit mission success and potentially put deployed units in danger.

This study will focus on toxic leadership, which is a type of negative leadership that umbrellas several styles of negative leadership behaviors. As more scholars have become interested in negative leadership styles such as toxic leadership, more information has been found to conclude that toxic leadership is not the problem in of itself. Toxic leadership is a type of leadership created within three dimensions- the right leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment (Padilla, et al., 2007). The following section will discuss these three domains as they come together to form the toxic triangle and a toxic leader.

### **The Toxic Triangle**

Toxic triangle theory suggests three components necessary for a toxic leader to thrive (Padilla, et al., 2007). Based on this theory, toxic leadership is merely one dimension of the toxic triangle. That is, leaders cannot be toxic on their own, but require susceptible followers to lead and a conducive environment in which to lead. Without these two dimensions, a toxic leader is merely a person in a position of leadership.

Each dimension of the toxic triangle framework includes it's own elements and traits to further describe what constitutes a destructive leader, susceptible follower or conducive environment. Based on this theory, academics have begun to understand the dynamics each dimension has within a toxic leadership situation. Moreover, some

scholars have studied one of the three dimensions more thoroughly to determine the exact traits, influences and impact it can have on the overall toxic triangle. For example, Thoroughgood’s dissertation developed and validated scales to measure followers’ susceptibility (2013). Additionally, Alvarado did a similar development and validation study in which she created scales to measure whether an environment is conducive for toxic leadership (2016). These scales will be fundamental assets in this research. Likewise, this study will use Padilla and colleagues’ (2007) toxic triangle theory as lens through which to examine the relationships between toxic leaders, susceptible

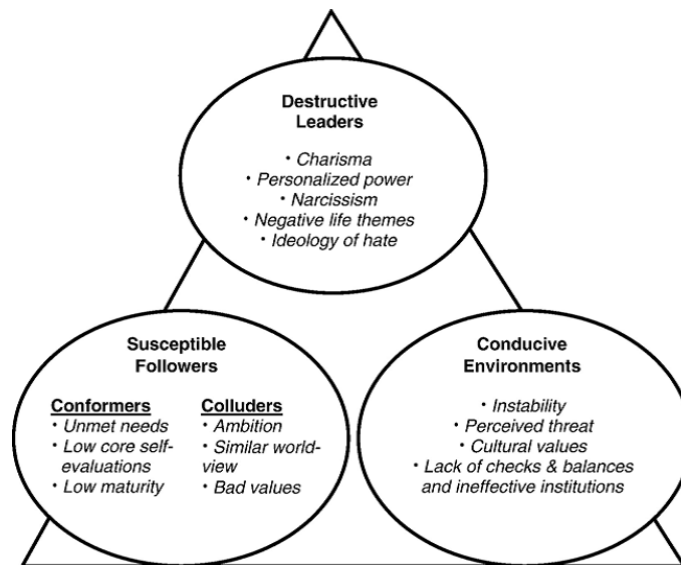


Figure 1. The Toxic Triangle.

Reprinted from “The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible followers, and Conducive Environments,” by A. Padilla, R. Hogan, and R. B. Kaiser, 2007, *Leadership Quarterly*, 18(3), p. 176-194. Copyright 2007 by Elsevier.

followers, and conducive environments (see Figure 1). Through this lens, the elements of the Air Force’s environment and followership characteristics that tend to induce toxic leadership behaviors will be identified. Furthermore, this research will analyze the

influence each of the domains has on one another as seen in Figure 2. In this conceptual model, the arrows illustrate the perceived influence a conducive environment and susceptible followers have on toxic leadership, as the antecedent variables. These antecedent variables and their outcome of toxic leadership will be discussed in the next sections.

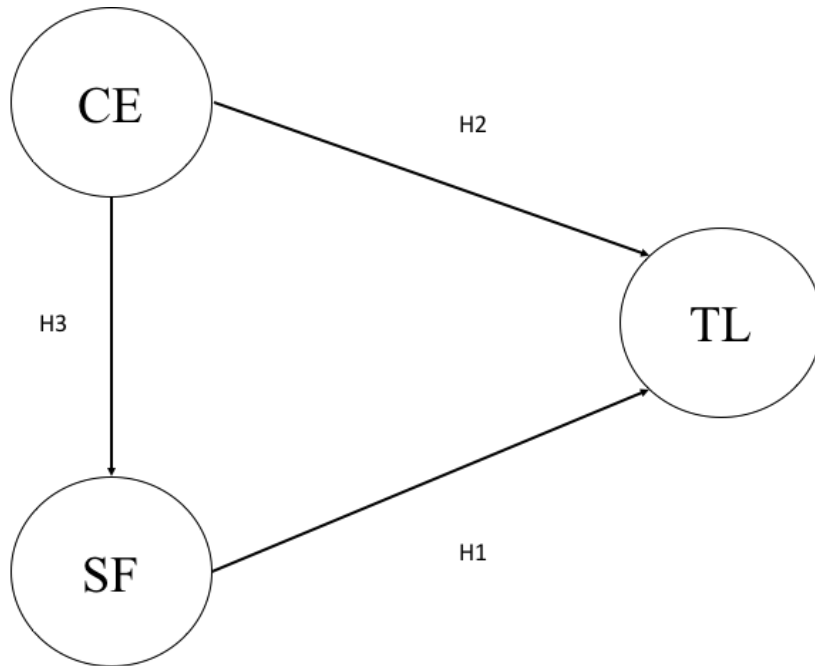


Figure 2. Conceptual model of the theorized influences each element has on each other.

### **Leadership**

The first domain of the toxic triangle is that of the toxic leader. Toxic leadership does not have one universal definition within literature. However, through his study of toxic leadership, Schmidt (2008) determined there were three common themes amongst the definitions of a toxic leader: 1) underlying neglect for the well-being of their subordinates; 2) micromanaging where subordinates are cowered and stifled; and 3) indicates that toxic leaders are narcissistic. These themes overlap among multiple styles

of negative leadership to include petty tyranny (Reed, 2015), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), and destructive leaders (Padilla, et al., 2007). As a result, research has found toxic leadership can be defined within a multidimensional construct that includes the behaviors from several types of negative styles that combined create the following toxic leadership behaviors, figure 3. For this study the studied outcome will be that of the presence of toxic leadership behaviors by the organizational leaders.

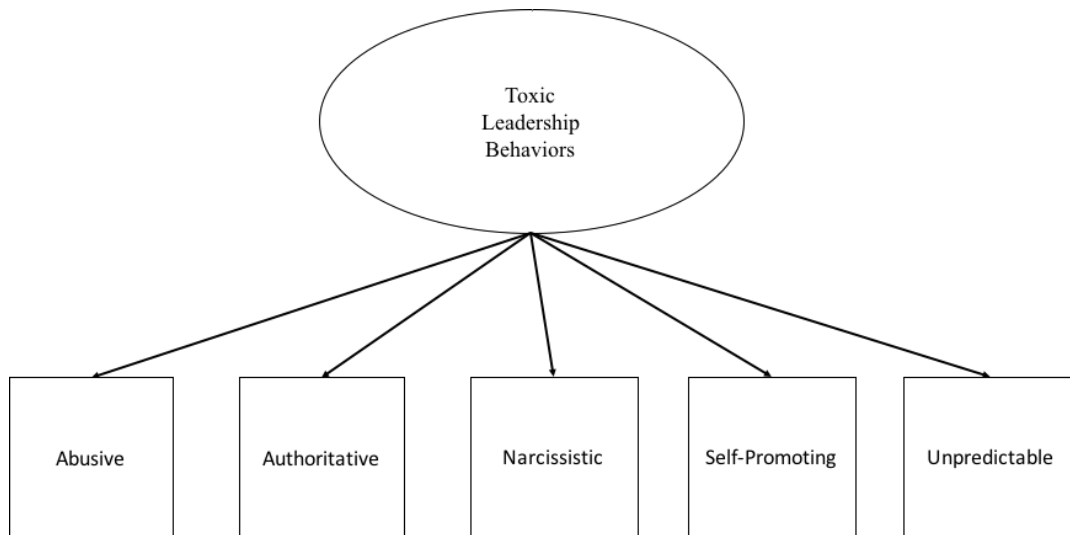


Figure 3. The five toxic behaviors that have been found to define toxic leadership.

**Abusive.**

Abusive supervision can be defined as a “sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact,” (Tepper, 2000, p.178). Abusive supervision much like an abusive romantic-relationship can be “characterized as

sustained or enduring in the sense that it is likely to continue until” the relationship is terminated, or the leader modifies said abusive behavior (Tepper, 2000). Abusive behaviors can be characterized by public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions and coercion (Bies & Tripp, 1998). It is within these displays of hostility that the abusive behaviors of supervisors can be seen to overlap those behaviors of toxic leaders. Moreover, Tepper focuses on the followers’ interactions with the abusive supervisor as well as how the abusive behaviors may be perceived in accordance to specific organizational policies or norms.

### **Authoritative.**

Authoritative behavior is demonstrated by a leader when she or he asserts authority and control over subordinates, demanding absolute respect and unquestionable obedience (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, and Farh, 2004, p. 91). This type of leadership behavior is not seen to be as destructive as toxic leadership but has some overlapping elements such as micromanaging subordinates through commandeering behaviors. Kiazad and colleagues also found within their study of authoritarian leadership that those individuals predisposed to Machiavellism are more likely to adopt an authoritarian leadership behaviors (Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, 2010). This link is important because it will be a measured behavior in determining the presence of toxic leaders within the Air Force.

### **Narcissism.**

Narcissistic leaders are defined as leaders who possess a grandiose sense of self, and a preoccupation with themselves (Doty & Fenlason, 2013). These types of leaders are focused immensely on themselves, their goals, their success, and how they are seen. Due

to the fact that leadership is a highlighted position of power and prestige, narcissists are drawn to these jobs. Narcissism in itself is not a destructive behavior, however, when the leader starts to take actions that enhance his or her own status to the peril of the organization, then the organization suffers. For these reasons, Padilla and colleagues decided to include narcissism as a key characteristic of a destructive or toxic leader.

### **Self-promoting.**

Self-promoting behavior has been defined as the behaviors that promote a leader's own interests above the interest of their unit's interests or mission (Schmidt, 2008). Another element of toxic leadership, this type of behavior can also be demonstrated in a leader's intention to decrease threats from rivals and talented subordinates. Aiming to distinguish a positive image from their leadership hierarchy, self-promoting leaders tend to accomplish organizational goals within the short-term without considering long-term consequences, usually at the expense of their subordinates (Steele, 2011).

### **Unpredictability.**

Unpredictability is defined by Schmidt (2008) as a wide range of behaviors that reflect dramatic shifts in mood states. When a leader is characterized as unpredictable, their negative behaviors are compounded by their unpredictability. Schmidt's research suggests that the unpredictability of a leader was the strongest predictor of both subordinates' willingness to stay in their organization and their satisfaction with their supervisor. Schmidt concluded that the unpredictability of a leader can make a bad leader toxic.

## **Antecedents of Toxic Leadership**

In summary, each negative style of leadership has an overlapping trait or characteristic of a toxic leader. Thus, this section facilitated in defining the vast definitional characteristics of toxic leadership. Moreover, the literature that focused on each of these leadership styles and behaviors also mentioned the influence organizational environment or followership behaviors had in perpetuating such negative and destructive behaviors. Therefore, suggesting that toxic leadership is an outcome of susceptible followership and a conducive environment. These dimensions are discussed sequentially, and then their possible interactions are considered.

## **Susceptible Followers**

The second dimension of the toxic triangle is that of the susceptible followers (Padilla, et al., 2007). Toxic leaders would not be a problem if they had no followers. Lipman-Blumen, recognized that leadership requires at least two willing participants-the leaders and the followers (2005). This raises the question as to what keeps followers participating once their leader shows toxic behaviors?

Two types of susceptible followers are defined in the toxic triangle theory-conformers and colluders. Conforming followers obey toxic leaders out of fear and are naïve to the fact that toxic behavior is wrong. Colluders, on the other hand, play into the toxic leader's agenda as a means towards personal gain (Padilla, et al., 2007). The following section will describe these two types of followers in more detail utilizing Thoroughgood's susceptible follower characteristics (2013).

## Conformers.

Characteristics of a potential conformers include having unmet needs, low self-concept, low core self-evaluation, and personal life distress. The following section delves deeper into each of these characteristics. Figure 4 illustrates Thoroughgood's theoretical model of the four characteristics that underlie follower conformance with toxic leaders (2013).

Individuals with unmet needs look outside themselves to meet these needs. When their needs are met by using a friendship or intimate relationship to fulfill them, the individual is predisposed to an unhealthy relationship. These individuals can end up in very toxic situations if the partner or friend treats them horribly, as it will be harder to leave someone who is fulfilling their unmet needs. Similarly, subordinates can have the same type of relationship with a boss. Maslow's hierarchy of needs discusses the basic needs every person pursues to meet.

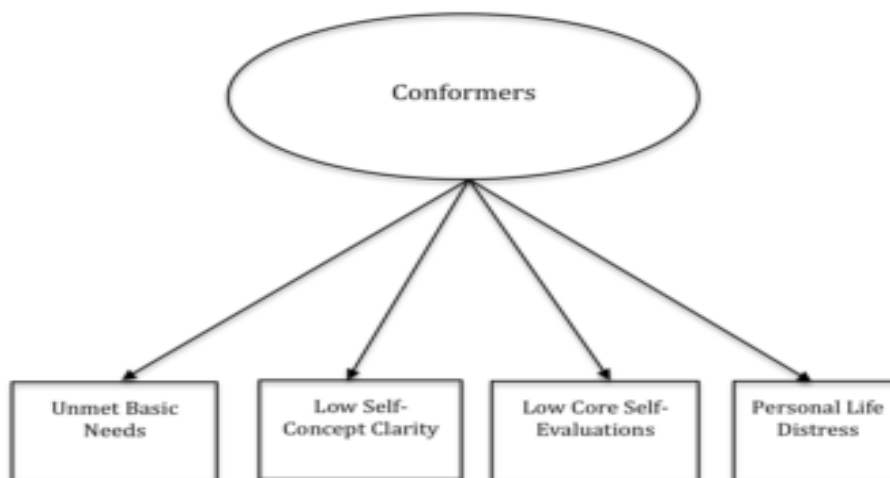


Figure 4. Dimensions Underlying Follower Conformity.

Reprinted from "Follower Susceptibility to Destructive Leaders: Development and Validation of Conformer and Colluder Scales," by C. Thoroughgood, 2013, ProQuest LLC. Copyright 2013 by C. Thoroughgood.

When a follower's need is unmet, an opening is left for a leader to come and meet that need. These needs include a desire for security, group membership or predictability in an uncertain world (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla, et al., 2007). This type of dependency creates an unhealthy relationship in which the subordinate may be less willing to leave a toxic leader-relationship because it is actually meeting one or more of their own needs. As a result, the leader will get away with acting toxic without consequence.

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

Low core self-evaluation is another characteristic of a conformer. Core self-evaluations are the "basic conclusions or bottom-line evaluations that individuals hold about themselves" (Judge & Bono, 2001, p. 81). One's core self-evaluation consists of her or his self-esteem, locus of control and self-efficacy. Low core self-evaluation is created by a low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and an external locus of control (Padilla, et al., 2007). Therefore, an individual with a low self-esteem may believe anything

negative the toxic leader says to them about themselves. Moreover, if a subordinate also has a low self-efficacy they do not believe they can perform well thus constantly seeking affirmation. These poor behaviors leave opportunity for a toxic leader to break down a subordinate through verbal abuse and manipulation. Additionally, those that have an external locus of control see themselves only as followers stuck with any leader that happens to them. Overall, a low core self-evaluation leaves an individual susceptible to following a toxic leader.

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

### **Colluders.**

Characteristics of a potential colluder include personal ambition, Machiavelli tendencies, greed, and low impulse control. The following section delves deeper into each of these characteristics. Figure 5 shows Thoroughgood's theoretical model of the four characteristics that underlie follower collusion (2013).

Personal ambition is the first characteristic of a collusive follower. Colluders tend to act in their own interests. Thus, a colluder will likely endure the toxic behaviors to

progress their agenda if there is any financial, professional, or political incentives for participating in a toxic leader’s mission, (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Padilla, et al., 2007).

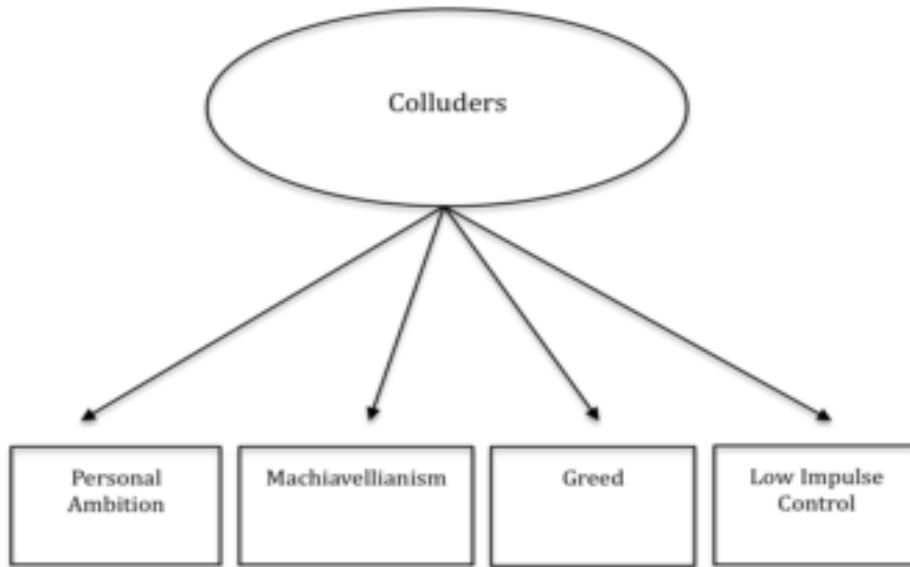


Figure 5. Dimensions Underlying Follower Collusion.

Reprinted from “Follower Susceptibility to Destructive Leaders: Development and Validation of Conformer and Colluder Scales,” by C. Thoroughgood, 2013, ProQuest LLC. Copyright 2013 by C. Thoroughgood.

Machiavellism is the second characteristic of a collusive follower. A type of social influence, Machiavellism, is characterized by the utilization of power, politics and expressive behavior to achieve desirable ends (Thoroughgood, 2013). Described by four factors, Machiavellist distrust others, partake in amoral manipulation, desire control in all things, and desire status above all else. Therefore, when the opportunity presents itself to gain power, status, and control the Machiavellist-colluder will use their charm to grown within the hierarchy of a toxic leader.

The third characteristic of a collusive follower is greediness. Much like the selfishness of personal ambition and the gain of power by the Machiavellist, greed is the selfish desire to obtain valuable financial and positional outcomes. Just like the other two characteristics, greedy colluders will go along with the toxic leader as long as it is beneficial to them in terms of money, position, power, or information.

The final characteristic of a collusive follower is low impulse control. Low impulse control means that these individuals possess low levels of self-control displaying no restraint from engaging in deviant behaviors as they do not consider the long-term consequences of their behavior (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This means that colluders with low impulse control are short-sighted, risk-takers that have a strong desire for immediate gratification. Thus, they are more likely to act immorally for a toxic leader if they know they will be rewarded despite what that means for others.

### **Role in toxic leadership.**

In summary, susceptible followers are made up of two types of individuals: conformers and colluders. Each of these types of susceptible followers is made up of four characteristics that may predispose an individual to follow a toxic leader despite their toxic behaviors. Moreover, without followers a leader is merely a figurehead for an organization. DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe the relationship between a leader and follower as an act in which the follower grants the leader an identity while maintaining a follower-identity for themselves. The relationship between a leader and their followers can influence the outcome of the leader. Therefore, see hypothesis I, it is predicted that susceptible followers' behaviors, collusive or conformance, will positively influence toxic leadership behavior.

*Hypothesis I: Susceptible followers' behaviors (i.e. colluder or conformers) will positively influence toxic leadership behaviors*

### **Conducive Environment**

Subsequently, conducive environments, or organizational culture, is the third dimension of the toxic triangle (Padilla, et al., 2007). An organization's culture can be predicative of the personnel's behavior and outcomes in different situations (Aubrey, 2012). For example, an organization that is tolerant of toxic behaviors from its leaders will be more likely to have conforming followers (Thoroughgood, Hunter, & Sawyer, 2011). Four environmental factors, seen in Figure 6, that are significant in creating a conducive environment for a toxic leader are: instability, perceived threat, organizational culture, and an absence of checks and balances (Padilla, et al., 2007; Alvarado, 2016).

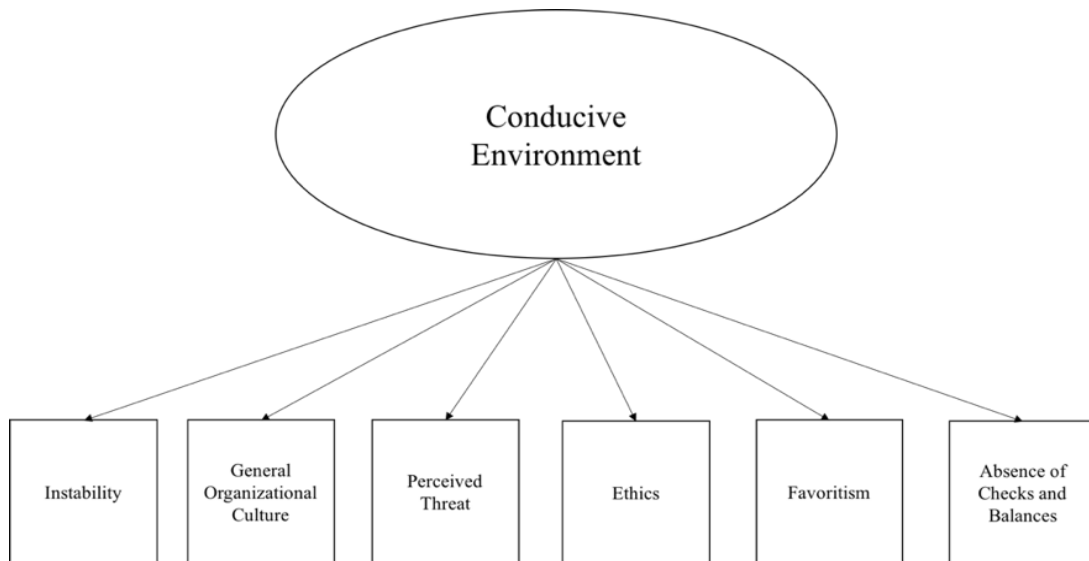


Figure 6. Dimensions of Conducive Environments.

Instability is the first characteristic of a conducive environment. This characteristic captures the degree to which an organization is constantly changing (Alvarado, 2016). Change creates feelings of uncertainty and insecurity within individuals, especially when jobs are on the line with the change. Thus, it is easier for toxic leaders to come into power in an unstable environment. Subordinates are looking for security and certainty, as discussed in meeting follower's unmet needs. As a result, leaders that can offer to meet these needs are easily accepted.

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

Perceived threat is the third characteristic of a conducive environment. This characteristic can take the form of any threat facing the organization whether it be a social, economic, or a sense of mistreatment within the organization (Alvarado, 2016). Padilla, et al. (2007) explained that a perceived threat is all that is needed for a leader to

take advantage of their subordinates. Moreover, the perception of a threat gives the organization a common enemy which strengthens the leader's position in the organization.

Ethics is the fourth characteristic of a conducive environment. This characteristic can be defined as “a systematic set of codes and rules intended to govern morals” (Parker, 1998). The foundation for an organization's code of conduct, ethics are usually driven by the leadership of the organization (Bagely, 2011). Due to the foundational impact ethics can have on an organization, an organization's culture that fosters ethical behaviors will benefit from sound and moral decisions. However, when ethical decisions and behaviors are not seen as a standard, the boundaries of what is acceptable among an organization can be blurred. It is in these incidences when a toxic leader can behave beyond what is acceptable as a leader.

The fifth characteristic of a conducive environment is the act of favoritism. Explained through the literature on leader member exchange theory, the relationship that followers have with their supervisors can impact their access to rewards, opportunities, and resources within the organization (Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Eptropaki, 2016). Studies have shown that when followers are within the “in-group”, they will identify less of the toxic leader's behaviors than when they are on the outside (Pelletier, 2012). Moreover, followers on the outside of the leader's group are more likely to file grievances against the offenses compared to those in the favored group.

An absence of checks and balances is the sixth characteristic of a conducive environment. Organizations with an absence of checks and balances have centralized control where upper management possesses the most leverage (Hambrick & Finkelstein,

1987). Thus, when a toxic leader is in a leadership position with centralized power and knows that no one will be checking in on them, there is a higher likelihood of an abuse of that power.

### **Role in toxic leadership.**

In summary, a conducive environment that perpetuates toxic leadership behavior is characterized by four factors: instability, perceived threat, organizational culture, and an absence of checks and balances. The organizational environment is made up of the circumstances, situations, conditions and context in which leaders and followers interact (Padilla, 2012). Therefore, the environment plays an important role in perpetuating a toxic leaders' behaviors, see hypothesis II. As a result, toxic leaders would have a hard time thriving in a well-balanced environment.

*Hypothesis II: Characteristics of a conducive environment will positively influence toxic leadership behaviors*

### **Conducive Environment's Influence of Susceptible Followers' Behaviors**

Individuals do not prepare for work by deciding how they would act in the face of a toxic leader and their destructive behaviors. Although susceptible followers have characteristics that would predispose them to being either a colluder or conformer, there are other responses they could initiate such as fighting back or leaving. As stated above, the organizational environment is made up of the situations and context in which leaders and followers interact. Thus, the environment plays an important role in the leadership-followership dynamic. If the organizational environment was known for having a zero-tolerance policy against toxic behaviors, followers would be less likely to become

susceptible followers. Therefore, it is predicted that a conducive environment will positively influence susceptible followers' behaviors, hypothesis III.

*Hypothesis III: A conducive environment will positively influence the susceptible followers' behaviors*

### **Susceptible Followers' Mediating Relationship**

Moreover, a conducive environment may positively influence the presence of toxic leadership behaviors within an organization. However, a toxic leader cannot truly be a leader without followers. They may be able to act toxic with or without subordinates, but they do not have anyone to lead or treat in a toxic manner without the followers' piece of the puzzle. Thus, the influence a conducive environment has on toxic leadership behaviors is believed to be mediated by the presence of susceptible followers.

*Hypothesis IV: The influence a conducive environment has on toxic leadership is mediated by susceptible followers*

### **III. Methodology**

This study was accomplished through two phases. The first phase included the development and refinement of the survey. Through the literature review, scales from three different academics were retrieved to measure the three dimensions of the toxic triangle: Schmidt's "*Toxic Leadership Scales*" (thesis), Alvarado's "*Alvarado Work Environment Scale of Toxicity*" (thesis), and Thoroughgood's "*Follower Susceptibility Scales for both Colluders and Conformers*" (dissertation). These three scales were combined to structure the preliminary survey. The preliminary survey had around 188 questions. Thus, focus groups were initiated to par down the number of questions necessary for the final survey. The second phase of the study was the conduction of the survey.

#### **First Phase- Focus Groups**

Focus groups are a qualitative approach to gathering data for research. Usually made up of about six to ten participants, focus groups are organized to facilitate discussion and interaction about a researcher's specific topic (Millward, 1996). Frequently used during the initial exploratory phase of research, focus groups are utilized during the preliminary phases of research to develop or refine items of draft questionnaires (Barbour, 2007). Moreover, focus groups can also be harnessed to adjust surveys for specific populations (Barbour, 2007). For this study, the focus groups were utilized to refine the 188-question survey as well as determine the applicability to the military context.

### **Participants and procedures.**

The focus group participants were volunteers from the Air Force Institute of Technology's (AFIT) senior Logistics and Supply Management class. Out of 32 officers/senior non-commissioned officers from the maintenance, munitions maintenance, and logistic readiness career-fields, 20 students volunteered to participate. Three groups were held, and participants were obtained through personal contacts.

The first focus group was held with six participants. A script was used to introduce the focus group and give the participants clarification and guidance on their objective. Then, each participant was given a handout with two parts: the definitions of each dimension's characteristics and the questions obtained from each scale. Using a 7-point, Likert-type scale, the participants determined the likelihood they have experienced a specific leadership behavior, the probability a specific environmental trait could characterize a military unit, and the degree they have experienced certain personality traits.

Based on the feedback received from the first focus group, a different approach was taken in regards to the followership scales by transforming the 115 personally reflective questions into ten miniature vignettes to measure the same personality traits of fellow peers in their organizations. The utilization of vignettes was determined to be the best approach to measuring valid and reliable responses from the respondents' opinions of follower traits as compared to the abstract version of the personally-reflective questions (Alexander & Becker, 1978). Each vignette was designed to measure for one to two of each of the personality factors being measured.

The second and third focus groups had six to eight participants each. The participants were given the redevise handout with the original set of directions. These participants confirmed the new followership scales and revised edition of the survey. Copies of the focus group directions, handout, the original scales, and revised scales can be found in the appendix.

### **Measures.**

In order to determine which questions were unnecessary for a military-specific survey, responses per question were logged and then averaged. The questions that had an average score of four or less, were reviewed for applicability and removal. Of the eighteen questions with an average of four or less, twelve were removed for the final survey.

### **Second Phase- Survey**

Surveys are a quantitative approach in collecting data for further research and analysis. Utilized within the second phase of an exploratory-designed research strategy, a survey builds from the first phase (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative results from the survey analysis is used to interpret or support the qualitative findings during the first phase. For this study, the survey will provide evidence to validate or invalidate the proposed hypotheses of the study.

### **Participants and procedures.**

After the focus groups' validation, and permissions were obtained by the AFIT Survey Control Board, the newly-minted "Beightel Leadership Survey" was conducted via Survey Monkey across several departments and offices. AFIT students, faculty and

staff were selected to participate in this study due to their breadth of experience with leadership in the Air Force, as well as diversity in both rank and career field. In order to guarantee the survey was properly prepared for distribution, the primary researcher designed the survey on Survey Monkey and then conducted a pre-test and pilot test. The pre-test was conducted by sending out the survey to six peers whom each did the survey in its entirety and then provided feedback on survey material, structure, and edits necessary.

The pilot test was conducted with AFIT's Operations Research (OR) students. This group of students were selected for the pilot study as a sample of AFIT's overall population. Out of the 60 OR students that were given access to the survey, 18 of the students completed the survey. However, the feedback based on the pilot test was positive.

Accordingly, the final surveying phase was conducted. To reach every department at AFIT, the primary researcher tried to initiate contact with the department professor in charge of the department's seminars. An email was sent to each departments' administrative office to find the appropriate POC. Then, an email was sent to each of the POC's to elicit interest in the survey. Five of the seven departments responded with interest, with four of the departments providing time during their seminar to pitch for participation of the survey. All five of the departments also provided the survey link to their students via email.

Following the first attempt at contact with survey participants, follow-up contact was made with specific peers in each department to encourage survey participation. Based on these personal, face-to-face contacts, 59 responses were obtained. To determine

the appropriate number of responses necessary for the study, Daniel Soper's a-priori sample size calculator was utilized. A sample size of 79 responses was determined to guarantee a 95 percent degree of confidence (Daniel, 2006). Thus, a final attempt at encouraging AFIT personnel to participate in the survey was conducted through a mass school-wide email, which garnered 100 responses. Overall, 159 participants responded to the survey, 121 of which were responses from active duty members ranging in rank from a Master Sergeant to Colonel.

### **Measures.**

The following 7-point, Likert-type responses anchors, obtained from Vagias (2006), were used for each dimension's scale: The responses for the Toxic Leadership Behaviors section ranged from 1, "highly unlikely," to 7, "highly likely". The Conducive Environments section's responses ranged from 1, "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree". Moreover, the responses for the Susceptible Followers' section ranged from 1, "never" to 7 "all the time".

### ***Toxic leadership.***

This study used Schmidt's 31-item scale to measure the toxic leadership behaviors (2008) displayed by the participant's present or past supervisor. Five behaviors were measured: abusive, authoritarian, narcissistic, self-promoting, and unpredictable. A sample item for abusive is, "My present/last commander ridicules their subordinates". A sample item for authoritarian is, "Controls how subordinates complete their tasks". A sample item for narcissistic is "Has a sense of personal entitlement". A sample item for self-promoting is, "Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her unit". A sample item for unpredictable is, "Has explosive outbursts".

### ***Conducive environment.***

The 43-item toxicity environmental scale developed by Alvarado (2016) to assess the presence of toxic work environment characteristics, was also used. Six characteristics of a conducive environment were measured based on a participant's present or past unit's environment: instability, general organizational culture, perceived threat, ethics, favoritism and an absence of checks and balances. A sample item for instability is, "Members of top management in my organization frequently change". A sample item for general organizational culture is, "My workplace does not foster a collaborative environment". A sample item for perceived threat is, "I feel intimidated at work". A sample item for ethics is, "Unethical behavior is tolerated from employees". A sample item for favoritism is, "In my organization, promotions are based on favoritism". A sample item for an absence of checks and balances is "Work is not reviewed to assure things are being done correctly".

### ***Susceptible followers.***

This study used 10 miniature vignettes created from Throughgood's (2013) original 115-item Follower Susceptibility Scale to measure the presence of susceptible follower personality traits found in the military. This shortened version included each trait that was measured in the original scales, but made the questions less personal, sensitive and abstract. Switching the personally-reflective questions to vignettes standardized the social stimuli across the personality traits, allowing respondents to observe others' actions instead of their own (Alexander & Becker, 1978). This change

supplemented the high unit nonresponse rates that plague surveys with sensitive questions about undesirable behaviors and attitudes (Tourangeau, Groves, & Redline, 2010).

Four personality traits of a conforming follower were measured based on the members of a participants current or last unit: unmet basic needs, low self-concept clarity, low core self-evaluation, and personal life distress. A sample item for an “unmet basic need” is, “Matthew is new to his unit and has felt like he hasn’t been able to connect with anyone in his peer group, often feeling lonely. The only place he has felt the acceptance and approval has been from his supervisor at work”. A sample item for “low self-concept clarity” is “Britany struggles with who she is as a person. She has found that her personal values often contradict one another when she hangs out with different groups of her peers”.

A sample item for “low core self-evaluation” is “Dan is easily stressed and tends to criticize himself a lot. Due to his strong doubts about his own competence, he constantly asks for validation of his work”. A sample item for “personal life distress” is “Mikayla feels like her life is spiraling out of control lately. She recently suffered the loss of her mother, and moved to a new location for work leaving her husband and kids behind to finish school. She feels emotionally vulnerable, which has made adjusting to her new job tough”.

Four personality traits of a colluding follower were measured based on the members of a participants current or last unit: personal ambition, Machiavellism, greed, and low impulse control. A sample item for “personal ambition” is “success encourages him to seek constant guidance and affirmation from his boss. During their daily meetings,

Steve likes to gossip about his peers behind their backs in order to look better in his boss' eyes". A sample item for "Machiavellism" is "Taylor believes that having high status is a good sign of being successful in life. Recently promoted, she has set her sights on a higher position. She is known for her drive, but has also been known to undermine the efforts of her peers that do not support her goals".

A sample item for "greed" is "Catherine does not like to share with other people. She is known for always wanting the latest "it" items and buying as many of that item as she can". A sample item for "low impulse control" is "Xavier has a tendency to act on his impulses. He tends to rush through tasks, without careful consideration of his subordinates and colleagues, in order to receive favorable opportunities from his leadership".

#### **IV. Analysis and Results**

“The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insight” (Fiornia, 2004, p. 2). To test the hypotheses presented earlier, the data collected from the survey was cleaned, validated and analyzed using the following statistical software: excel, SPSS, AMOS, and PROCESS. By validating the measurable variables and dimensions, the data was analyzed using ordinary least squares path analysis in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). This test of the conceptual model assessed both direct and indirect relationships of the constructs to toxic leadership.

##### **Measures Validation**

Prior to analyzing the data, the missing values were evaluated within the data set with Little’s Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test to determine whether there was a pattern among the missing values. The MCAR test validated that 15 missing variables were indeed missing at random (Little, 1988). The missing variables were filled with the average response to continue validating the data.

The dimensionality of the independent constructs (toxic leadership behaviors, conducive environments, and susceptible followers) were examined using exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory (CFA) factor analysis. The EFA conducted, (principal components with varimax rotation) revealed seven rotated factors with no significant cross loadings above .4. Results are seen in Table 1.

The final seven constructs are: toxic leadership behaviors (TL), favoritism (FA), susceptible followers (SF), ethics (ET), instability (IN), absence of checks and balances (CB) and general organizational culture (GOC). Moreover, the majority of the SF

**TABLE 1: FINAL ROTATED FACTOR STRUCTURE, ANTECEDENT SCALES**

Scale Items	TL	FA	SF	ET	IN	CB	OC
	TL2: Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions	<b>0.671</b>	0.122	0.073	-0.026	0.228	0.092
TL3: Is not considerate about subordinates' commitments outside of work	<b>0.733</b>	0.180	0.180	0.035	0.121	0.268	0.016
TL7: Controls how subordinates complete their tasks	<b>0.770</b>	-0.031	0.129	0.144	0.185	0.107	-0.052
TL8: Invades the privacy of subordinates	<b>0.753</b>	0.031	0.130	0.271	0.164	0.124	-0.019
TL9: Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways	<b>0.796</b>	0.099	0.117	0.125	0.104	0.162	-0.030
TL10: Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own	<b>0.827</b>	0.121	0.120	0.028	0.147	0.221	-0.017
TL11: Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in special circumstances	<b>0.678</b>	0.068	0.171	0.004	0.248	0.321	0.008
TL12: Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not	<b>0.757</b>	0.015	0.066	0.146	0.153	0.206	0.002
TL13: Assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organization	<b>0.822</b>	0.164	0.127	0.204	0.064	0.128	-0.002
TL14: Thinks that he/she is more capable than others	<b>0.792</b>	0.222	0.075	0.144	0.063	0.046	-0.065
TL15: Has a sense of personal entitlement	<b>0.852</b>	0.231	0.106	0.142	0.141	0.041	0.033
TL16: Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person	<b>0.691</b>	0.351	0.084	0.066	0.133	-0.131	-0.099
TL17: Thrives on compliments and personal accolades	<b>0.774</b>	0.274	0.078	0.089	-0.057	0.036	0.006
TL18: Drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present	<b>0.832</b>	0.120	0.127	0.061	0.089	0.080	0.103
TL19: Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her unit	<b>0.780</b>	0.086	0.239	0.157	0.032	0.278	0.028
TL20: Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead	<b>0.796</b>	0.227	0.190	0.064	-0.061	-0.044	0.098
TL21: Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her	<b>0.854</b>	0.086	0.194	0.172	0.055	0.107	0.038
TL22: Acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion	<b>0.841</b>	0.049	0.113	0.205	0.038	0.026	0.097
OC2: My organization has been associated with scandals in the past.	0.358	0.174	0.130	0.149	<b>0.657</b>	-0.004	0.146
OC3: I find it hard to know what policies to follow because they change often.	0.185	0.226	0.263	0.076	<b>0.797</b>	0.058	0.018
OC4: Changes in my organization are often unpredictable.	0.106	0.287	0.174	0.150	<b>0.727</b>	0.230	0.057
OC21: Unethical behavior is tolerated from employees.	0.173	0.205	0.095	<b>0.864</b>	0.141	0.050	0.036
OC22: Top management participates in unethical behavior.	0.309	0.222	0.188	<b>0.804</b>	0.038	0.176	0.032
OC23: Unethical behavior is a norm in my organization.	0.338	0.167	0.143	<b>0.825</b>	0.157	0.193	-0.025
OC24: In my organization, there is (are) a favored group(s) of employees.	0.265	<b>0.764</b>	0.076	0.237	0.259	0.140	0.116
OC25: I feel as if some employees get better opportunities than others.	0.218	<b>0.730</b>	0.050	0.152	0.250	0.262	0.079
OC26: Favored employees get away with things others would not.	0.315	<b>0.700</b>	0.229	0.265	0.256	0.225	0.023
OC27: It is easier for favored employees to get resources.	0.310	<b>0.677</b>	0.290	0.165	0.101	0.308	0.077
OC29: Authority is never passed down to in my organization.	0.347	0.123	0.052	0.169	0.063	<b>0.756</b>	0.115
OC30: There is no information sharing between upper and lower levels in my workplace.	0.152	0.358	0.024	0.076	0.088	<b>0.722</b>	0.122
OC31: There seems to be no check on the power of our leadership here	0.367	0.293	0.185	0.292	0.163	<b>0.598</b>	0.029
SFB1: Steve is a highly ambitious officer, taking every opportunity to further his career. His desire to succeed	0.262	0.397	<b>0.658</b>	0.120	-0.024	-0.073	0.074
SFB2: Catherine does not like to share with other people. She is known for always wanting the latest "it" items	0.211	0.004	<b>0.681</b>	0.169	0.027	0.070	0.096
SFB3: Xavier has a tendency to act on his impulses. He tends to rush through tasks, without careful	0.119	0.136	<b>0.767</b>	0.061	0.173	0.051	-0.007
SFB5: Taylor believes that having high status is a good sign of being successful in life. Recently promoted, she	0.177	0.223	<b>0.777</b>	0.086	0.111	0.139	-0.089
SFG4: Mikayla feels like her life is spiraling out of control lately. She recently suffered the loss of her mother,	0.192	-0.169	<b>0.655</b>	-0.005	0.347	0.004	0.031
OC7: In my organization, promotions are decided based on performance.	-0.011	0.052	0.033	0.109	-0.196	-0.079	<b>-0.823</b>
OC9: My organization seems to value employee.	0.039	0.240	0.097	0.161	-0.058	0.103	<b>0.753</b>
% of variance (total = 12.146%)	1.860	2.610	1.440	1.800	2.240	2.000	0.196
Mean	2.350	3.450	3.090	2.010	3.290	3.000	3.930
SD	1.370	1.620	1.200	4.030	1.500	4.250	0.070
$\alpha$	0.971	0.926	0.821	0.923	0.821	0.821	-0.989

**Notes:** Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 7 iterations: TL, Toxic leadership behaviors; FA, Favoritism; SF, Susceptible followers; ET, Ethics; IN, Instability; CB, Absence of checks and balances; OC, General organizational culture

construct is made up of the colluder variables, including one conformer's variable of personal life distress. As for the original dimension of a conducive environment, five of the original six characteristics (ET, FA, CB, IN, GOC) factored out into individual constructs. Cronbach's alphas showed reliabilities above 0.80 for each variable, except general organizational culture (Nunnally 1978; Chin and Newsted 1999). Given that the general organizational culture scales have been infrequently tested empirically, the scale was retained for further analysis (Hair, et al., 2010).

The CFA provided further evidence of construct validity for all seven factors. As a result, the original conducive environment dimension was divided into five constructs based off its original six characteristics: instability (IN), favoritism (FA), ethics (ET), absence of checks and balances (CB), and general organizational culture (GOC). Only two variables loaded on GOC, but this dimension was retained due to the exploratory nature of this study. The CFA also provided evidence of discriminant and convergent validity of the identified dimensions.

To provide discriminant validity, the constructs inter-factor correlations (using composite factor scores) were compared, see Table 2. All composite reliabilities were greater than each construct's corresponding correlations with other constructs. Additionally, all correlation estimates were less than 1.00, indicating the factors were distinct from one another, providing further evidence of discriminant validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

To provide evidence of convergent validity, the constructs' average variance extraction (AVE) and composite reliabilities (CR) were compared, see Table 2. All composite reliabilities were above 0.70, except for GOC which was kept for exploratory

purposes (Carlson and Herdman, 2012). Moreover, each individual AVE was > 0.50, except for SF which was very close to .50 and was kept due to the exploratory nature of the research. The AVE and CR values indicate that the correlation within the constructs are in agreement, providing evidence of convergent validity (Ab Hamid, et al., 2017)

**TABLE 2: SCALE MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, CORRELATIONS, AND AVEs.**

Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	TL	SF	IN	ET	CB	FA	OC
Toxic Leadership Behaviors (TL)	2.35	1.37	(.66/.97)						
Susceptible Followers (SF)	3.09	1.20	0.45**	(.49/.82)					
Instability (IN)	3.29	1.50	0.46**	0.47**	(.62/.83)				
Ethics (ET)	2.01	4.03	0.49**	0.38**	0.40**	(.81/.93)			
Lack of Checks and Balances (CB)	3.00	4.25	0.54**	0.33**	0.45**	0.49**	(.60/.82)		
Favoritism (FA)	3.45	1.62	0.55**	0.45**	0.56**	0.55**	0.61**	(.76/.93)	
***General Organizational Culture (OC)	3.93	0.44	0.07	0.11	-0.02	.20*	0.08	0.13	(.63/.01)

**Notes:** The AVEs/CR are in the parentheses on the diagonal, and the correlations are on the off diagonal. \*, \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and .001 levels, respectively (two-tailed). \*\*\*\* Indicates the dimension with only two loading factors.

### Hypotheses Test Results

A mediation analysis was performed to test *H1* through *H4*, see Table 3. The mediation model was developed in which susceptible followers were modeled as mediating the relationship between a conducive environment and toxic leadership behaviors (see Figure 7). The mediation analysis format utilized in this study follows the format described in Hayes (2013) and Zhao, et al. (2010). An analysis was conducted using the PROCESS custom dialog (developed by Hayes, 2013) for PASW Statistics 24 (IBM SPSS). PROCESS performs a path analysis-based mediation using OLS regression, and generates direct (unstandardized coefficients) and indirect effects (using bias-

corrected bootstrap samples) for the variables of interest. Overall, the results were significant for both susceptible followers ( $R^2=.29$ ,  $F=12.43$ ) and toxic leadership behaviors ( $R^2=.44$ ,  $F=19.51$ ).

**TABLE 3: MEDIATION ANALYSIS**

Antecedent (X)	SF (M)		TL (Y)		LCL	UCL
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE		
SF	-	-	0.218**	0.0824	-	-
IN	0.2403***	0.0677	0.0892	0.0718	0.0112	0.1117
ET	0.1207	0.0767	0.1709*	0.0788	-0.0098	0.0749
CB	-0.0021	0.0754	0.2442**	0.0768	-0.0382	0.0342
FA	0.1502*	0.0734	0.1352	0.0758	0.0012	0.0828
OC	0.1715	0.1905	-0.0695	0.1946	-0.0578	0.1511
*** $p < .001$						
** $p < .01$	$R^2=.2889$		$R^2=.4351$			
* $p < .05$	$F=12.4315$ ***		$F=19.5142$ ***			

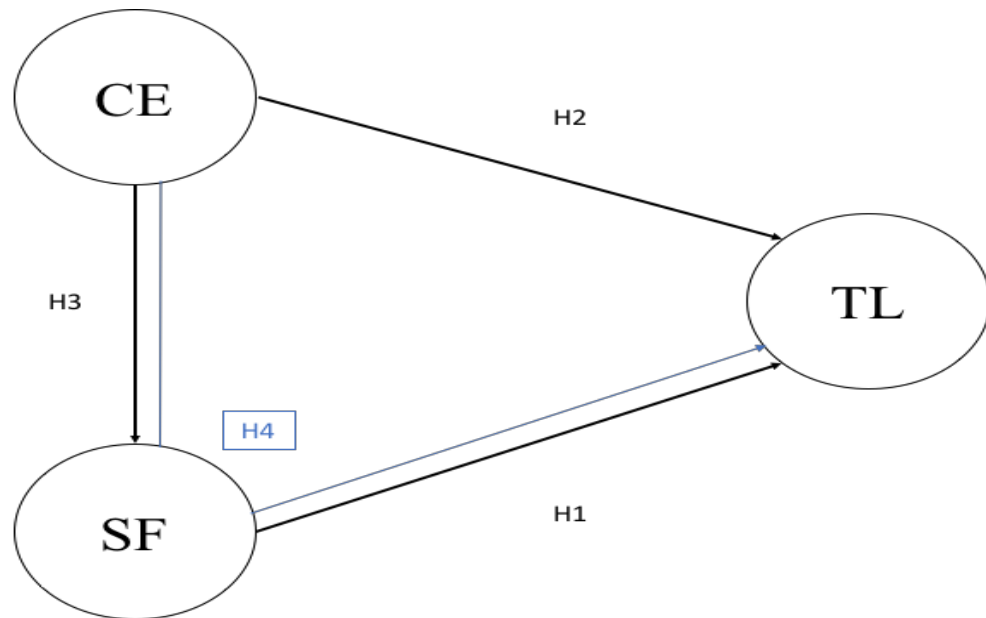


Figure 7: Conceptual model with H1 through H4.

### **Hypothesis I.**

To assess the hypothesized relationship between susceptible followers and toxic leadership behavior (*H1*), the mediation model results (Table 3) were used. Susceptible followers were found to have a positive influence on toxic leadership behaviors with a significant  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ . These results provide evidence to support *H1*.

### **Hypothesis II.**

To assess the hypothesized relationship between a conducive environment and toxic leadership behaviors (*H2*), the same model was used. As discussed above, the original conducive environment dimension was split into five different constructs. Thus, to assess *H2*, each construct as it related to TL (Table 3) was assessed. From the results, it can be seen that two of the five constructs have a significant influence on TL. ET directly influenced TL ( $c=.17$ ), which provides evidence that followers who perceived unethical practices in the workplace also identified toxic leadership behaviors. Additionally, CB directly influences TL ( $c=.24$ ), providing further evidence that followers who experienced an absence of checks and balances in their organizations also identified toxic leadership behaviors. This indicates that there is partial support for *H2*, as only the constructs ethics and an absence of checks and balances ( $p < 0.05$  and  $0.01$ , respectively) have a positive relationship with TL.

### **Hypothesis III.**

Furthermore, the hypothesized direct relationship between a conducive environment and susceptible followers (*H3*) was assessed. Using the five different constructs for a conducive environment again, the study found that two of the five

indicated a significant influence on susceptible followers. Instability and favoritism, were both significant with a p-value < .001 and .05 respectively. As a result, there is evidence of partial support for *H3*.

#### **Hypothesis IV – The mediation.**

Finally, the full mediation model was utilized to assess the hypothesized relationships (*H4*). Using the PROCESS model, both a direct and indirect effect was found for each construct within the model. The bias-corrected bootstrap method determines the indirect effects (Hayes, 2013; Zhao, et al., 2010). A significant indirect effect is drawn from the bootstrap confidence intervals that rest entirely above or below zero, which establishes the mediating relationship hypothesized (*H4*) (Zhao, et al., 2010).

As recommended by Hayes (2013), five PROCESS mediation models were run to determine the indirect effects of each conducive environment variable on susceptible followers and toxic leadership behaviors. For example, instability (*X*) was modeled to predict toxic leadership behaviors (*Y*) through the presence of susceptible followers (*M*), while treating favoritism, ethics, an absence of checks and balances, and general organizational culture as covariates (*C*). Each model also included a direct path from *X* (and *C*) to *Y* (figure 8). The process was repeated for each conducive environment variable. Results of the analyses are presented in Table 3.

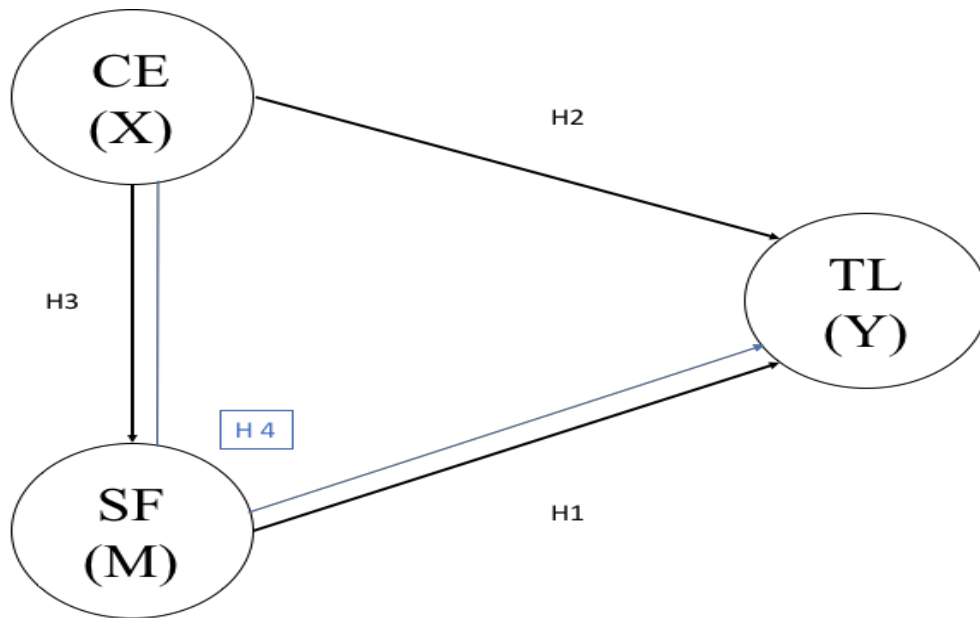


Figure 8. Conceptual model displaying mediating relationship.

Results show that instability (IN) indirectly influences toxic leadership behaviors through its direct effect on susceptible followers. That is, followers who experienced instability within their organizations were more likely to be a susceptible follower, and susceptible followers within instable organizations were more likely to experience toxic leadership behaviors. A bias-corrected bootstrap 95 percent confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $axb=.0528$ , not significant), based on 10,000 bootstrap samples, was entirely above zero (.01-.11) resulting in a statistically significant indirect effect, despite its practical significance being limited. Thus, indicating an indirect-only mediation (Zhao, *et.al.*, 2010).

Favoritism (FA) indirectly influenced toxic leadership behaviors through susceptible followers. That is, followers who experienced favoritism within their organizations were more likely to become a susceptible follower ( $a=.15$ ), and susceptible

followers experiencing favoritism were more likely to experience toxic leadership behaviors ( $b=.22$ ). A bias-corrected bootstrap 95 percent confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $axb=.03$ ), based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (.00-.08). This finding indicates an indirect mediation (Zhao, *et.al.*, 2010), though is practical significance may be seen as minimal.

The results for how ethics (ET) influences TL, shows that the indirect effect confidence interval (-0.01-0.07) is not significant. Thus, this variable does not mediate. Furthermore, the construct of having an absence of checks and balances (CB) also shows that the indirect confidence interval (-0.04-0.03) is not significant. Therefore, there is no mediation. Lastly, the final variable assessed (GOC) for mediation, does not have any significant effect on SF or TL, as none of the coefficients are significant. As a result, the mediation model provides partial support for *H4*, with two out of five variables (IN and FA) indicating an indirect-only mediation through SF. These results and their associated implications, are discussed in the next section.

## V. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to empirically assess the Toxic Triangle theory as it applies to the military context, and determine whether an organization's followers and environment perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors. It was hypothesized that both the presence of susceptible followers and a conducive environment would positively influence the presence of toxic leadership behaviors. Moreover, it was hypothesized that a conducive environment would have a positive influence on the presence of susceptible followers. As well as, hypothesized that a conducive environment would influence toxic leadership behaviors through the susceptible followers.

The study evaluated the presence of toxic leaders in the Air Force by focusing on three dimensions: toxic leadership behaviors, susceptible followers, and characteristics of a conducive environment. By introducing three fairly new scales into the empirical analysis, the survey results provided evidence that each scale should be restructured to maintain reliability and validity. The toxic leadership scales that started with five dimensions of behaviors, kept only four dimensions and became one single factor (TL).

Additionally, the original susceptible follower scales were re-constructed into an entirely new scale that included vignettes to describe both conformers and colluders, within the survey. However, as a result of the structural analysis, the colluder scale was the only scale to be validated. The scale measuring for conformance was not strong enough, as only one item was retained. This could be a result of the military structure and

training, as Airmen are taught to conform as a standard within the military. Thus, only one question from the conformance scale was kept, combined with the colluder scale to make up the single factor of SF.

The original environmental scale included six characteristics of a conducive environment. The structural exploratory factor analysis suggested that, in this context, only five different factors described the overall dimension of CE: instability, ethics, absence of checks and balances, favoritism, and general organizational culture. Each of these factors was then evaluated according to the hypotheses.

The empirical results revealed significant influences on toxic leadership behaviors through indirect and direct relationships with an organization's followers and environment. Susceptible followers had a significant, positive influence on the presence of toxic leadership behaviors. Moreover, if the unit was characterized by instability or favoritism the followers could be more likely to collude with the toxic leader. Furthermore, a unit that participates in unethical practices or lacks organizational checks and balances may be more likely to perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors.

### **Theoretical Implications**

To the author's knowledge, this study marks the only attempt to apply the whole toxic triangle theory to an organization, as well as in a military context. Researchers benefit from this insight that the findings can inform future research design and focus. Namely, researchers might want to consider this approach at looking at toxic leaders to consider the impact the environment of an organization and the behaviors of followers have on a leader's propensity to toxic behavior.

This study also marks the first empirical test of the influence susceptible followers and a conducive environment has on toxic leadership behaviors. Previous studies have looked at a single factor such as the leader, the followers or the environment, but have yet to quantitatively define the influences each factor has on the other (Alvarado, 2016; Schmidt, 2008; Thoroughgood, 2013). The findings from this study extend the literature by providing empirical support for the toxic triangle theory and studying the entire triangle. Moreover, these findings expand the theoretical framework by providing responses from a military organization. Additionally, these findings modified a new construct for susceptible followers that will need to be further adjusted for the conformer dimension.

The theory and method applied in this study can be used for any organization with a leader, manager, or boss and subordinates. The findings could be applicable to anyone that find themselves in a position of leadership or followership. Within this theory, everyone plays a role in toxic leadership. Acknowledging that a toxic leader does not exist on their own, allows organizations to better prepare their environments, followers, and leaders.

### **Air Force Leadership (Managerial) Implications**

The evidence that toxic leadership behaviors have been experienced in the Air Force by Air Force personnel implies that some of the indicated factors that influence toxic leadership behaviors also exist in the Air Force. Empirically the results support this notion by acknowledging the characteristics that could be perpetuating toxic leadership behaviors in military units. The factors influencing toxic leadership behaviors were

discussed above: susceptible followers, ethics, favoritism, instability and a lack of checks and balances. Each of these factors may play a role in the direct or indirect influence of a leader's behavior. Thus, leaders should be aware of the presence of these variables in their organizations and the affect they may have on the organization's culture. , an organization has a better idea of what types of characteristics to end.

Evidence suggests that susceptible followers have a direct influence on toxic leadership behaviors. Therefore, to mitigate the harmful effects a toxic leader can have on an organization, a leader should first look at the behaviors and personality of the followers within the unit. The most harmful indicators of susceptible followers according to this study are those that display collusive behaviors such as ambition, greed, a lack of impulse control, and Machiavelli tendencies. The presence of these traits only become problematic when they are found at excessive levels. To diminish the negative effect of these personality traits, a manager would want to promote independent, strong followers, with positive value systems, willing to challenge toxic leader behaviors (Thoroughgood, et al., 2012). Balancing the presence of these traits in the office may require a specific screening or placement process to ensure that groups of collusive followers do not end up in the same office, which would foster a potential environment for toxic behaviors.

Furthermore, the presence of the toxic leadership behaviors cultivated through susceptible followers could be additionally mitigated by controlling for organizational instability and favoritism. These two environmental characteristics were found to have a direct effect on susceptible followers, and an indirect effect on TL behaviors through SF. For military units, instability may be hard to eliminate as personnel continue to rotate in and out of units. As well as, the military operate daily on an understanding of flexibility

and preparedness for the mission at hand (Copeland, 2015). Instead of elimination, organizations built around a degree of unpredictability should train their personnel how to best handle the instability through resiliency while also maintaining the common core values and structure they can.

Favoritism is a more controllable factor in diminishing the effect on susceptible followers. Most personnel in an organization can identify the actions and behaviors of their leadership that promote a perception of favoritism. Based on the leadership-member exchange theory, those of the “inner group” (the favorites) will perceive the toxic leader’s behaviors as honorably and just, while the “outer group” will perceive the leader’s behaviors unjust and destructive (Martin, et al., 2016). As a result, favoritism may not only influence the presence of susceptible followers but also increase the divide within an organization which can decrease morale and mission capability. To control for favoritism, the leader must make a cognitive effort to provide the same resources, opportunities, and attention to their subordinates.

Ethics was identified as having a direct influence on toxic leadership behaviors. Organizational environments that fail to correct unethical decisions and behaviors, ultimately endorse unethical practices to their personnel. Thus, creating a culture that is okay with throwing staplers, ridiculing subordinate, and other unethical practices. Conversely, ethical climates should encourage subordinates to hold their leaders responsible for their behaviors and decision. Military organizations usually touch on ethics in their leadership training, but not much else is said. Organizations must adopt

practices and principles that stress their ethical values, and allow outlets to encourage employees to be proactive in preventing unethical practices and behaviors (Thoroughgood, et al., 2012).

Leaders can identify the aforementioned factors of influence by keeping a system of checks and balances in place for their organizations and units. The study identified an absence of checks and balances directly influences toxic leadership behaviors. It is this type of system, that put in place could prevent toxic leader behaviors as well as control for favoritism, instability and unethical practices. Managers can cultivate organizations that empower their employees to have a voice. Organizations that enforce rigid, obedient top-down structures are more likely to experience displays of toxic leadership behaviors as subordinates often lack any power to say anything (Thoroughgood, et al., 2012). The military structure requires obedience and utilizes the chain of command, which can work as long as there are checks and balances in place to guarantee there is not an imbalance of power.

Irrevocably, this evidence does not suggest that all leaders are toxic, rather that the right equation perpetuates those leaders that may be predisposed to toxic behaviors. Thus, organizations and units can take a proactive approach by establishing a system of checks and balances for its leaders. Empowered personnel can be encouraged to voice their concerns over unethical practices, favoritism, and their fears of instability. Moreover, training on ethical precedents can prevent unethical practices. Likewise, controlling for instability and instances of favoritism may help reduce collusive behavior in the face of unacceptable leadership behavior.

Knowledge is power. Toxic leadership has been linked to decreased performance, commitment and job satisfaction (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). By reducing the number of influencing factors in the equation, toxic leadership could be eradicated. Thus, eliminating one of the largest stressors on our Airmen and personnel. Furthermore, organizations should provide proper outlets for Airmen to “out” their toxic leaders, or the environments in which they may thrive.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

No research study is without limitations. The sample of participants was taken from AFIT students, faculty and staff. However, every student is also a member of the armed forces, and many of whom are older and have experienced much more than the average graduate student. While the sample is roughly representative of this segment, the authors recommend caution in generalizing the findings across the entire Air Force or United States military. Moreover, the variety of career fields represented at AFIT are segmented with a majority of students in more technical or analytical career fields over operational. Future research should seek to survey more of the Air Force’s population, whether by career field, rank, Flight, Squadron, Group, Wing or MAJCOM.

The military environment also provides some limitations in the structure of the organizations and standardization of training. Thus, some behaviors may be more or less prevalent in the military as would be experienced in civilian organizations. On the other hand, some behaviors may be experienced more in civilian organizations that were not experienced in the military context.

The results of this study revealed support for the underlying theoretical frameworks, but there were some anomalies. Future research should focus on improving the environmental scales. Broken up into 5 different constructs, the construct for general organizational culture only loaded on two factors which leaves a lot to be examined. Moreover, the susceptible follower scales were completely redesigned. As mentioned before, the scales of collusion performed well, while the conformance scales did not. Thus future research should look at the factor structure of the scales and work to hone them for future utilization.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the empirical findings from this study demonstrate that susceptible followers and specific characteristics of a conducive environment may directly or indirectly influence toxic leadership behaviors. By looking at toxic leadership as a symptom of a more complex problem, work can be done to eliminate the root cause(s). The Air Force relies on their leaders to cultivate and manage their Airmen, while also accomplishing the mission. Toxic leadership subverts the Air Force core values by eroding integrity, putting self before service, and providing excellence through negative means. Targeting what perpetuates toxic leadership behavior is the first step in eradicating these leaders from our ranks. A challenge we must take.

## Appendix A

### The Beightel Leadership Survey

#### Welcome

#### Leadership Research

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by researchers from the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT), Graduate School of Engineering and Management, Department of Operational Sciences. The main objective of this project is to identify the elements of the Air Force's environment and Airmen's followership characteristics that enable certain leadership behaviors. The results of this study will be included in a report to the AU staff, as well as research publications. You were selected as a participant in this study because of your experience as both a leader and subordinate within the Air Force. You should read the information below before deciding whether or not to participate.

IAW AFI 38-501, para 2.2, your participation in this survey is encouraged but voluntary. Strict confidentiality concerning any identifiers of individual survey respondents is maintained and data collection is anonymous. Your feedback is critical to academic program improvement and greatly appreciated.

- This survey is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the survey at any time or for any reason. We expect that the survey will take 20-25 minutes.

- You will not be compensated for this survey.

- Your responses be kept strictly confidential. All survey results will be presented at an aggregate level.

- This project will be completed by March 2018. All survey responses will be stored in a secure server until 1 year after that date. The survey responses will then be destroyed.

Please contact Capt Beightel with any questions or concerns at [rachael.beightel@afit.edu](mailto:rachael.beightel@afit.edu).

\* 1. I understand the procedures described above, and I agree to participate in this study.

## The Beightel Leadership Survey

### Survey Instructions

**We are interested in your experiences with your leadership and the climate of your current unit. Please respond to the following statements to the best of your ability. For the purpose of this survey, “organization” refers to your squadron or equivalent and “leadership” refers to your first line supervisor. This survey should take approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.**

**Note: If you are an in-residence student, please base your responses in consideration of your last unit.**

\* 1. Please select what type of organization you are in currently (or were in last):

Other (please specify)

\* 2. My first line supervisor is/was a...

Other (please specify)



















# The Beightel Leadership Survey

## Demographic Information

**For the following questions:**

**If you are a military member, please answer question 1 and then skip down to questions 4 through 7.**

**If you are a civilian member, please answer questions 2 through 7.**

1. Military Grade

2. Civilian Grade

3. Civilian Grade Level

4. Number of years in service

5. AFSC (Military) or Job Series (Civilian)

6. Age

7. Gender

8. Military Branch

## Appendix B

# How a Conducive Environment and Susceptible Followers Influence Toxic Leadership Behaviors in the Air Force: An Examination of the Toxic Triangle Theory

Capt Rachael Beightel

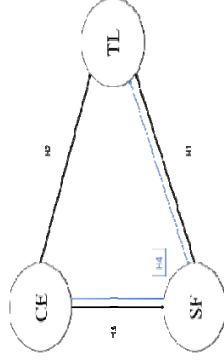
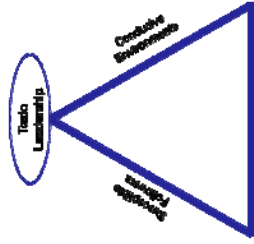
Co-Advisors: Col Matthew Douglas, PhD

Maj Benjamin Hazen, PhD

Logistics and Supply Chain Management (ENS)

Air Force Institute of Technology

### Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations



### Key Findings:

1. Toxic leadership behaviors found in the Air Force are abusive, authoritarian, narcissistic, and self-promoting behaviors
2. Susceptible followers in the Air Force are predominantly colluders
3. Elements of a conducive environment present in the Air Force are: ethics, instability, favoritism, absence of checks & balances
4. Susceptible followers directly influence toxic leadership behaviors
5. Instability and favoritism are two of the characteristics of a conducive environment that directly influence the presence of susceptible followers
6. Ethics and a lack of checks & balances are two of the characteristics of a conducive environment that directly influence the presence of toxic leadership behaviors
7. Instability and favoritism were found to have an indirect-only mediation on toxic leadership behaviors through their influence on susceptible followers



### Introduction

Leadership is not merely a position given to someone, but an action of leading other people, an organization or a unit towards a specific direction. The impact a toxic leader has on an organization can reach far and wide affecting an organization's culture and climate. A toxic leader can be defined as an individual "who by dint of their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal qualities generate serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Toxic leaders, in the context of the military, add stress to personnel who are already serving in stressful roles. The more time an individual has spent in the military, the higher the chance they have experienced a toxic leader at one point in time. According to the toxic triangle theory (Padilla, 2007), toxic leadership is merely a piece of the puzzle without two contributing pieces: susceptible followers and a conducive environment. Thus, a conducive environment along with susceptible followers enable a toxic leader to thrive. The Toxic Triangle Theory was used as foundation for this research. In the case of this study, the Toxic Triangle Theory is observed through a military context to determine whether there are specific environmental and follower characteristics that lead Air Force leaders to become toxic.

### Research Goals

The purpose of this research is to identify the elements of the Air Force's environment and Airmen's follower characteristics that enable toxic behaviors. This research answers the following questions through an empirical analysis:

- IQ1: What are the dimensions of toxic leadership?
- IQ2: What dimensions form a conducive environment for toxic leadership?
- IQ2a: How does a conducive environment influence toxic leadership behavior?
- IQ3: What dimensions form to create followers susceptible to toxic leadership?
- IQ3a: How does follower influence toxic leadership behavior?
- IQ3b: How does the conducive environment influence the susceptible followers?

### Methodology

A mixed methods approach was utilized. Scale items were retrieved from a literature review, while were condensed based on focus group feedback. The scale items were then used to develop the Beightel Leadership Survey which was given over a course of three months to AFIT students, faculty and staff.

Overall, 159 responses were received in which we could analyze using SPSS statistical software. Based on these results, our scales found to have seven rotated factors. These seven factors were used to test our model.

### Implications

Toxic leaders are known to exist in both civilian and military organizations. Studies have verified their presence and alluded to the environments in which they thrive. However, little has been empirically verified as to what characteristics of an environment or follower perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors. This study provided statistical evidence in determining what characteristics of an environment and followers perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors within the Air Force.

### Future Research

Future research could gather further the empirical evidence by surveying a larger population of the AF's population. By surveying a population outside of AFIT, the future researchers could also determine whether there is a predominant presence of certain characteristics in certain career fields or among specific rank structures.

Other opportunities for research include identifying the elements of the AF environment and followership culture that perpetuate toxic leadership but cannot be easily eliminated due to engrained processes or systems.

Theoretically speaking, there is still much to be learned about the toxic leadership triangle. Future researchers can continue to refine the susceptible follower scales, as well as look into the conducive environmental scales to see whether variables that were removed would be necessary for other populations.

### Significance

Toxic leadership impacts the Air Force's number one resource: the Airmen. Negatively affecting the lives of their Airmen, toxic leaders can have an impact on the performance of those individuals and their organization of up to 38% in work quality. By identifying the characteristics of the environment and followers that perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors, the Air Force can work to eliminate these specific characteristics from its ranks. Furthering their pursuit in providing a safe and healthy work environment for their Airmen. This improvement may also increase our rate of retention.

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  The purpose of this thesis was to determine what characteristics of the Air Force's environment and Airmen perpetuate toxic leadership behaviors. This survey study was designed, using the toxic triangle theory, to evaluate the toxic leadership behaviors, susceptible follower traits, and conducive environment characteristics participants have experienced in the Air Force. The study applied ordinary least squares path analysis to determine the influence susceptible followers and characteristics of a conducive environment have on toxic leadership behaviors in the Air Force.  Results revealed that collusive followers have a direct influence on toxic leadership. While only two characteristics of a conducive environment-ethics and absence of checks and balances-influence toxic leadership behavior directly. Furthermore, the mediating model found that two other characteristics of a conducive environment-instability and favoritism- have indirect effect on toxic leadership behaviors through susceptible followers. These findings suggest that leaders of organizations should target creating an environment based on an ethical culture and implementing a system of checks and balances of its unit and leaders. Moreover, leaders should eliminate areas of instability and practices of favoritism to eliminate collusive behaviors from subordinates. Directing focus at these specific elements may put an end to toxic leadership behavior.					
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