

Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military



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Abstract

Several researchers have examined different kinds of negative leadership styles such as petty tyranny and destructive leadership. The current study examined toxic leadership, an issue of major concern to the U.S. military. The DEOMI Climate Scale (DEOCS), which consists of subscales dealing with equal opportunity and organizational effectiveness, and the Toxic Leadership Scale, which consists of subscales dealing with self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, and authoritarian leadership, were administered to 5,181 military personnel. Males perceived more abusive supervision and more authoritarian leadership than females. Blacks perceived all aspects of toxic leadership to be worse than Whites. There was an interaction of rank and seniority for abusive supervision and narcissism. Enlisted military perceived more abusive supervision and narcissism than officers. Senior personnel perceived less abusive supervision and narcissism than junior personnel, but this decrease was much greater for senior officers than for senior enlisted. The toxic leadership scales had stronger correlations with the organizational effectiveness scales of the DEOCS (-.211 to -.477) than with the equal opportunity scales (-.102 to -.343). In regression analyses in which the equal opportunity scales were entered first and toxic leadership were entered second to predict each of organizational effectiveness subscales the ΔR^2 s ranged from .067 to .142. The implications of this research will be discussed.

Introduction

The effects of leadership styles on performance outcomes began with the work of Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939). Throughout much of the 20th century the qualities of effective leaders or ways in which to make leaders more effective has been the subject of much. In recent years there has been increasing interest in ineffective leadership and its effects on followers.

Various kinds of ineffective leadership have been identified, including petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), toxic leadership (Whicker, 1996), destructive leadership (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007), narcissistic leadership (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), and authoritarian leadership within paternalistic leadership (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004). These terms although similar are not identical, as seen in Table 1 (revised from the work of Pelletier, 2010).

Table 1

Harmful Behaviors and Associated Leadership

Characteristics	Abusive Supervision	Petty Tyranny	Toxic Leadership	Destructive Leadership	Narcissistic Leadership	Authoritarian Leadership
Demeaning,	X	X	X	X	X	X

¹ The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not express those of the United States Government.

Marginalizing, or Degrading						
Ridiculing or Mocking	X	X	X	X	X	
Exhibiting Favoritism	X	X	X		X	
Emotional Volatility	X		X	X	X	X
Coercion	X			X		X
Using Physical Acts of Aggression		X	X	X		X
Forcing People to Endure Hardships				X	X	X
Being Deceptive or Lying	X	X	X	X	X	X
Blaming Others for the Leaders' Mistakes	X	X	X	X		
Grandiosity				X	X	X

There have been many complaints about toxic leadership in the military but little research (e.g., Reed, 2004). The major exception was a study by Steele (2011). He found that approximately 20% of soldiers had toxic leaders. Toxic leadership behaviors included micromanaging, being mean-spirited/aggressive, rigidity and poor decision-making, and having a poor attitude and setting a bad example. Toxic leadership was strongly associated with a lack of ethics, putting own needs ahead of unit, and lack of subordinate confidence to follow in life-or-death situations

Method

Between April 4 and April 13, 2012, 5,181 United States military personnel completed the DEOMI Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS; Truhon & Parks, 2007). The DEOCS contains 66 items that deal with equal opportunity (EO) and organizational effectiveness (OE). In addition these personnel also completed a shortened (15-item) version of the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS; Schmidt, 2008). The TLS consists of five subscales: Self-Promotion, Abusive Supervision, Unpredictability, Narcissism, and Authoritarian Leadership. Three representative items were chosen from each subscale.

Results

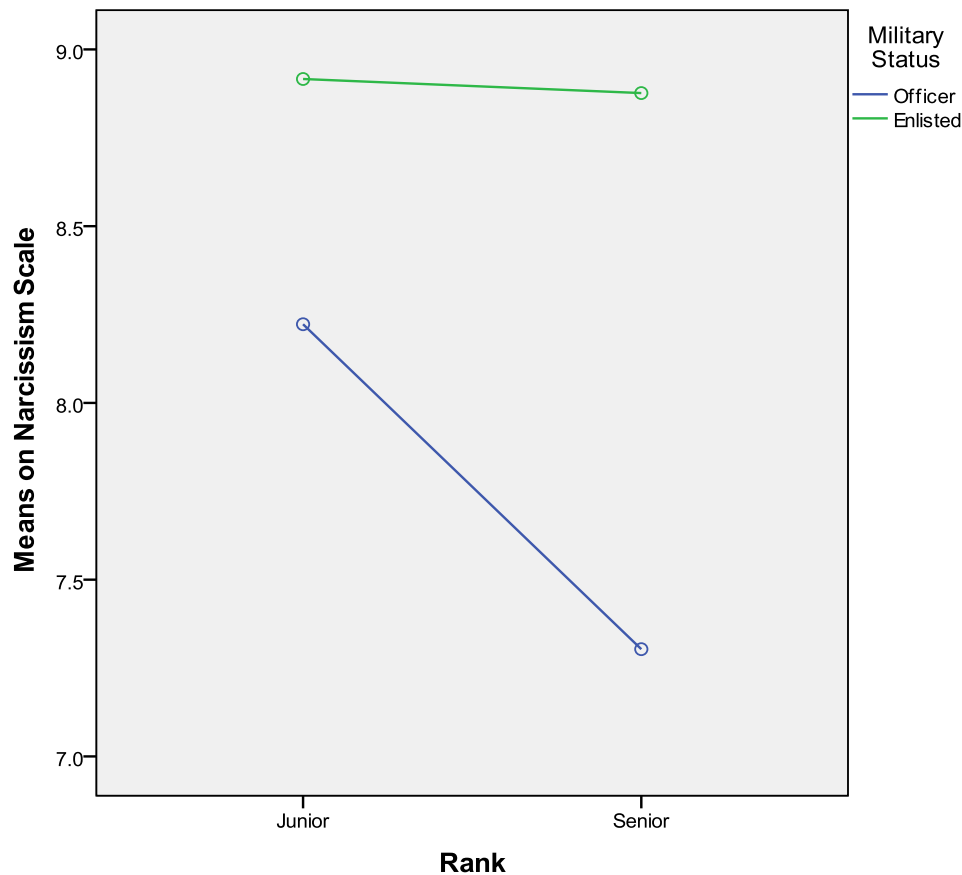
The DEOCS showed high levels of internal consistency. In addition the subscales of the TLS ranged from .79 (Abusive Supervision) to .85 (Self-Promotion).

Racial and ethnic differences were found on the TLS. Men perceived more abusive supervision and more authoritarian leadership than women. Blacks perceived all aspects of toxic leadership to be worse than Whites.

Using the TLS subscales as dependent variables, 2 (Junior versus Senior status) \times 2 (Enlisted versus Officer rank) analyses of variances were performed. A status \times rank interaction resulted for the Narcissism subscale. As can be seen in Figure 1 decrease in perceived narcissism from junior to senior status was much greater for officers than for enlisted personnel.

Figure 1

Military Status and Rank's Effects on Narcissism



Correlations between the TLS subscales and EO subscales of the DEOCS and between TLS subscales and the OE subscales of the DEOCS were calculated. In general the correlations between TLC subscales and the OE subscales of the DEOCS were stronger (*rs* ranged from -.21 to -.48) than between the TLS subscales and the EO subscales of the DEOCS (*rs* ranged from -.20 to -.34).

Schmidt (2008) had previously reported that the TLS subscales were moderate predictors of workers' attitudes. Similar results were found here. When TLS subscales were used to predict job satisfaction R^2 was .21. When used to predict work group cohesion R^2 was .20.

One hypothesis in the development of the DEOCS was that EO was a meaningful predictor of OE. The question to be asked whether the TLS provides additional proportion of the variance in predicting OE subscales beyond what EO subscales predict. A two-step regression

analysis was run with EO subscales entered first in predicting the OE subscales. In the second step the TLS subscales were entered into the regression analyses to determine whether they accounted for noticeably more variance. As can be seen in Table 2, for all but one of the OE subscales the TLS subscales accounted for at least an additional 10% of the variance.

Table 2

Predicting Organization Effectiveness Subscales of the DEOCS from Equal Opportunity Subscales of the DEOCS and Subscales of the Toxic Leadership Scale

Organizational Effectiveness Subscale	R ² for Equal Opportunity Subscales	ΔR ² for Toxic Leadership Subscales
Organizational Commitment	.230	.116
Trust in the Organization	.188	.128
Work Group Efficacy	.124	.067
Work Group Cohesion	.165	.097
Leader Cohesion	.174	.142
Job Satisfaction	.150	.110

Discussion

To meet the United States military’s need for more detailed information, newer versions of the DEOCS have included subscales dealing sexual assault and bullying. Because toxic leadership has been acknowledged to be a problem in the military and that this study has found that the TLS subscales accounted an appreciable amount of variance in OE, a new subscale on toxic leadership should be added to the DEOCS. Some have regarded toxic leadership as a greater problem in the United States military than problems related to EO:

The people I dealt with were not capable of designing a survey to get at the questions I wanted answered. They were the EO folks, but this is bigger than EO. That’s an important business, but there are other aspects that need to be addressed. [Y]our instrument must be targeted to the leader as well. You could discern resource mismatch versus a Myers-Briggs type “JERK.” (Reed, 2004, p. 69)

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