Toxic leadership is a term used to define an organizational situation where a leader abuses his position of authority. His departure from the organization results in a situation that was worse prior to his arrival.

Due to the destructiveness of toxic leadership, the first step in managing this issue is to identify its symptoms. Toxic leaders are those who bully, threaten, and yell. They usually display significant mood swings, and those swings dictate the progress of the day. They can be malicious, according to Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee (2002), and will have no problem putting their interests ahead of everyone else’s even if this causes harm to the other individual. Furthermore, identifying toxic leaders can be accomplished through their treatment of superiors (Hughes et al. 2009). They are usually friendly and articulate towards superiors, but the opposite with colleagues and subordinates. They do not feel they need to part of a team, nor do they feel they are obliged to participate in any team building or culture building activities. According to Cunningham (1979), they are seen by the majority of subordinates in a negative light, normally as arrogant, self-serving, petty, and inflexible. The problem with toxic leaders is that their behavior is not isolated, but rather, can have long reaching effects around the organization, and can affect employee behavior and motivation, as well as contribute to areas of conflict.

According to Borgelt and Falk (2007), most toxic leaders lead by fear, causing a sense of hate and disklike by followers. Fear of losig their job or being reprimanded for insobordinatation can cause such hate to increase leading to high levels of stress and conflict. One of the most predominant conflicts that can happen are personality clashes. Those involve a strong utilization of emotion and perceptions regarding the leader’s motives and intentions. For example, if a leader asks a subordinate to stay late after work on a continuous basis just for spite. Resentment by the employee can result in explosive reactions at certain times. Motivation drops significantly, leading to reduced work standards, greater levels of absenteeism, and a significant employee turnover. However, the problem of toxic leadership goes beyond simple reactions by employees. Toxic leadership ends up having followers lack direction and may feel a sense of failure or loss due to the fact that they are not being appreciated. This is a natural expectation of human behavior within the context of unhappiness due to a lack of support. Once trust between the leader and his and her subordinates are lost, it is usually extremely difficult to regain this trust, even if the conditions improve. People usually remain skeptical of others who have mistreated them in the past (Cunningham, 1979).

Naturally, toxic leadership also leads to a loss of trust and an increase of feelings of betrayal. As followers naturally feel a leadership should be concerned with their well-being, they may feel that they are dispensable. This inhibits creativity, decision-making, work ethics, and a willingness to put in any effort in getting the job done. As a result, the overall organizational wellbeing suffers significantly.

On an emotional level, it is always ideal for a leader to have a strong sense of emotional intelligence. A sense of being able to identify the needs of followers and their demands for a health work environment is expected. Constant discrimination and bullying by a toxic leader, according to Lewis and Jobs (1993), may result in long-term emotional scarring that affects their daily lives. According to Hughes et al. (2009), employees usually take the feelings they experience at work everywhere they go, even home.

Furthermore, toxic leaders, according to Nienaber and Roodt (2008), do not really add any value to the organization as a whole, even in relation to superiors. Although they may appear to be hard working and effective leaders to their superiors, the fact usually is that they are superficial in the perception they communicate. In short, employees expect their leader to take responsibility of the team’s actions and to always have his/her employees’ best interests in mind. A good leader does not project unfair treatment on subordinates or be emotionally or physically abusive. He encourages creative thinking and flexibility in decision-making, offering support for their progression in their professional careers. According to Hughes et al. (2009), a toxic leader fails at presenting any of those important concepts, which leads to long-term ill effects at the organization. Researchers agree that toxic leadership needs to be dealt with swiftly and not allow it to take hold within the organization (Cogliser and Brigham, 2004).

The problem, according to Lewis and Jobs (1993), is that subordinates rarely report toxic leadership behaviors to upper management for fear of simply upsetting the leader even more. As a result, the behavior can go on for years unnoticed. However, what becomes apparent early on is the symptoms of toxic leadership. Those, according to Nienaber and Roodt (2008), should create a sense of skepticism and lead to further analysis of the situation. Classic symptoms are employee absenteeism and lower work productivity. Toxic leadership is the root cause of both of those issues.

Some employees feel the best strategy is to wait and hope upper management notices the toxic leader and act accordingly. Therefore, a waiting game arises within the organization that can sometimes take a long time for any results to materialize.

Personally however, I believe there are steps an organization can take in order to identify toxic leadership early. One of those is conducting a periodic anonymous survey where employees can communicate their sentiments. Surveying should be particularly performed when overall work productivity as noticeably decreased, indicating a problem.

One of the negative aspects of toxic leadership is the demeaning approach towards employees and the continuous communication to them that their abilities are limited or 'not good enough'. Toxic leaders thrive on pulling rank and feel more confident if they can dominate their subordinates. As a result, employees get into the habit of not using their own creative thinking and end up depending on their leader for guidance. This dependence makes employees appear to behave like children and not adults. They feel their only value is their value to their leader, and they yearn for acceptance from their leader regardless of the damaging effects of such a relationship.

In an organizational environment in which the leaders do not share decision making power with subordinates and employees do not feel valued as individuals beyond their work product, the workplace culture is likely to become toxic due to the frustration of the employees. The culture will become one in which the employees do not have dedication to the organization because the organization does not value their contribution or them as people.

This alienation of the employee is manifested in absenteeism, poor work product, lack of participation in voluntary organizational events and a focus, by employees, on their work hours and not work quality. They put in time at work and do not internalize their work and the organization after hours. All these behaviors result from the authoritarian, non-participatory, unappreciative, revenue driven organizational environments.

Five elements of toxic leadership:

1. An apparent lack of concern for the well being of subordinates. This can be seen in abusive leaders who exhibit an underlying neglect for their subordinates and may even be harmful or abusive by berating, belittling, or bullying their subordinates. Toxic leaders who display this trait hold subordinates responsible for things beyond their control or for tasks beyond their job descriptions, and insist their subordinates work harder and sacrifice more than is reasonable to expect. In contrast, a nontoxic leader values his or her subordinates, and understands the importance of motivating subordinates through positive means to achieve better results.

2. A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects the organizational climate. A toxic leader might display authoritarian leadership by micromanaging subordinates, and instructing them to comply with the leader's dictates and actions. This can be scene in leaders who refuse to listen to subordinates and insist on implementing only their own ideas. A nontoxic leader is a team player who is attune to the organizational climate and strives to make the workplace pleasant for all in order to foster greater communication and exchange of ideas.

3. A lack of respect for subordinates at the expense of progress and organizational welfare. This might be the result of a toxic leader being narcissist, and having a need to be viewed in a positive light plus a desire to enhance their own self-image. Leaders display an overwhelming self-interest, lack of empathy or sympathy for others, and often display an inflated image of their own importance. This may be reflected in a toxic leader through superficial charm, pathological lying, and failure to accept responsibility for own actions. A nontoxic leader understands the value of people as an organizational resource and treats subordinates as human beings with emotions and thoughts.

4. A lack of personal ethics, honesty and straightforwardness. A toxic leader might engage in self-promotion and continually remind others of the leader's importance, at the cost of belittling others. Toxic leaders might also engage in unethical or amoral activity, which can lead to subordinates compromising on ethical decisions, and in their actions. A nontoxic leader is ethical, credible, and does not tolerate any deviation from honesty on his part or that of his subordinates.

5. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest. This can be displayed by the leader acting in an unpredictable manner, such as a leader having rash mood changes or making sudden changes to programs and policies seemingly without justification or thought but seemingly to benefit the leader's whim. A non toxic leader is competent, and uses education and knowledge to guide actions, helping the organization progress.

The leadership process is centered on influence. In order to influence others to behave a certain way or commit to organizational goals, leaders use power. Since powerful leaders can have a big impact on the organization and its members, it is critical that leadership be ethical (Yukl, 2006). Below is a list of unethical practices that leaders should steer clear of:

1. Gratifying personal needs and career goals
2. Preference for favorites/alliances
3. Claiming personal vision as organizational vision
4. Taking short cuts in order to achieve personal goals
5. Avoiding important decisions that carry personal risk
6. Distorting issues in order to influence followers
7. Suppressing criticism
8. Blocking development of subordinates so there are no challenges to leadership (Yukl, 2006)

In order to curb the possibility of misuse of power, ethical practices in leadership and organizations are essential. It isn't uncommon to hear of powerful leaders derailing ethically at the pinnacle of their careers. The temptation to abuse the leader's power simply becomes too great. Leaders that behave unethically have some common traits: they are not focusing on organizational goals, they are focused on personal gratification, they involve others within the organization in their unethical actions, they attempt to cover-up their unethical behavior, and they become delusional in their attempts to excuse their unethical actions (Ciulla, 2003).

An example of unethical leadership can be found in the case of John Gutfreund and Salomon Brothers. Gutfreund, through his concentration on immediate financial profits, advanced an organizational culture at Salomon Brothers that allowed unethical practices to thrive. Gutfreund focused on making money without regard to ethical considerations (Sims & Brinkman, 2002). You can find out more about this case in the article referenced below.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and control one's own emotions and to recognize and understand emotional responses in others. Emotional intelligence has been proposed as an invaluable skill for effective leaders. Goleman's (1998) paradigm bases emotional intelligence on five elements of emotional intelligence and twenty-five emotional competencies.

These five elements include empathy, adroitness in handling relationships, motivation, self-regulation, and self-awareness. The twenty-five emotional competencies are strongly associated with one of the five emotional intelligence elements listed above. The bullets below offer a brief explanation of each of the five elements of emotional intelligence:

• Empathy: This skill of emotionally intelligent individuals involves being able to read and respond appropriately to others' emotions. In the work environment, empathetic leaders understand and sympathize with their peers and subordinates viewpoints and feelings. Beyond just recognizing and caring about the emotions of others, empathetic leaders are service oriented, encourage the development of others, are politically adroit, and embrace diversity (Goleman, 1998).
• Social Skills (adroitness in handling relationships): Emotionally intelligent individuals are successful at building relationships. Solid relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors provide support within the work environment. People with this skill are collaborative and cooperative, promote a participative approach to work goals, and are team-focused (Goleman, 1998).
• Motivation: Emotionally intelligent people are driven to achieve, committed to organizational goals, promote initiative, and are optimistic. This skill also involves constantly challenging oneself and others. These individuals promote a learning environment, constantly seek to improve themselves, will sacrifice for the good of the organization, and embody the goals and values of the organization (Goleman, 1998).
• Self-regulation: Emotionally intelligent people who have this skill are able understand and recognize their own emotions and how the emotions can impact organizational situations. This skill allows the individual to maintain self-control to keep from disrupting the work environment; they adapt to changing situations with composure, and take responsibility for their actions.
• Self-awareness: People with this skill are emotionally aware or able to recognize their own emotions. This skill involves recognizing one's limitations and using individual values to guide decision making. While understanding one's limitations, self-aware individuals are also self-confident and values their capabilities (Goleman, 1998).

The traits listed above can be closely associated with ethical leadership. As I am sure you are aware, people without these particular skills often are promoted to leadership positions. Sometimes these individuals are promoted due to political maneuvering, technical expertise, and favoritism. Supervisors that micromanage, belittle subordinates, and have emotional outbursts make the work environment toxic and can promote an unethical climate within the organization (Goleman, 1998). Many of these toxic supervisors also restrict employees' creativity and innovation, rendering organizations ineffective in responding to changing demands (Goleman, 1998). Developing skills that are based on values and ethical practices are critical to effective leadership.

Goleman (1998) and other emotional intelligence advocates claim emotional intelligence is the most critical skill for an effective leader. Goleman (1998) asserts that his research indicates that emotional intelligence is twice as important as merely being intelligent and having a high level of expertise. Goleman (1998) further states that leadership success is largely 90% due to having high emotional intelligence. It seems intuitive that considerate and caring supervisors and leaders make the work place happier.

References

Borgelt, K. & Falk, I. (2007) The leadership/management conundrum: innovation or risk

 management? Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 28, pp. 122-136.

Ciulla, J. (2003). The ethics of leadership. Belmont, CA: Thompson-Wadsworth Publishing.

Cogliser, C. C., & Brigham, K. H. (2004) The intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship:

Mutual lessons to be learned, Leadership Q, 15, pp. 771–799.
Cunningham, J. B. (1979) The Management System: Its Functions and Processes, Management

Science, 25, pp. 657-670.
Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee (2002) Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional

Intelligence. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

Goleman, D. (1998). Working with emotional intelligence. New York: Bantam Books.

Hughes, L.R. et al. (2009) Leadership: Enhancing the lessons of experience, 6th Edition. New

Jersey: McGraw-Hill publications.
Lewis, T. C., Jobs, M.S. (1993) Conflict Management: The Essence of Leadership, Journal of

Leadership & Organizational Studies, 1, pp. 47-59
Nienaber, H. & Gerrie, R. (2008) Management and leadership: buccaneering or science?

European Business Review, 20, pp. 36-50.

Reed, G.E. (n/d). Toxic Leadership. Retrieved from http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/reed.pdf.

Schmidt, A.A. (2008). Development and Validation of the Toxic Leadership Scale. Retrieved from <http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/1903/8176/1/umi-umd-5358.pdf>

Sims, R., & Brinkman, J. (2002). Leaders as Moral Role Models: The Case of John
Gutfreund at Salomon Brothers. Journal of Business Ethics, 35(4), pp. 327-339.
Retrieved January 31, 2010, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/250774683.

Yukl, G. (2006). Leadership in organizations. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.