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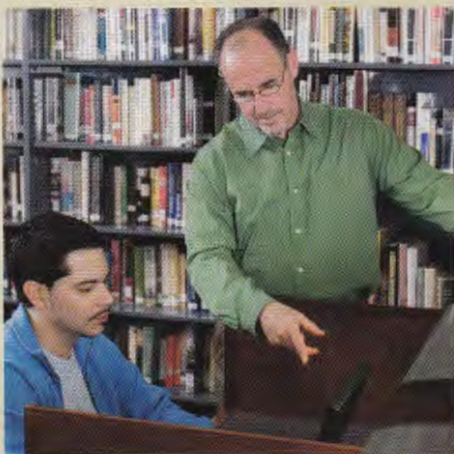


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VIRTUE ETHICS AND TOXIC LEADERSHIP: TACKLING THE TOXIC TRIANGLE

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Teaching continues to develop in English Sixth Form Colleges as teachers look to improve their professional practice. However, despite improvements in terms of practice and students' outcomes, teachers continue to be closely managed and experience ever closer mechanisms of scrutiny. For those observers who adopt a critical position of Government policy and the impact of New Public Management (NPM), recent experience has led to the redefinition of teachers' work and their professional identity. The autonomy of the professional in the classroom has been replaced by the panopticon of a bureaucratic audit culture in which teachers are evaluated according to their 'performativity' (Ball, 2003). It is within this environment that toxic leadership is able to emerge and indeed flourish. This paper explores the nature of toxicity in the post-compulsory sector and offers some strategies to address this issue.

Introduction

Over the last decade or so, interest in dysfunctional leadership behaviours has grown as researchers have chosen to investigate a series of prominent failures in corporate management, ranging from Enron Corporation in 2001, the Stafford Hospital scandal post-2007 and the Credit Crunch after 2008. In addition to being studied as a concept by organisation theorists (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007; Walton, 2007), toxic leadership has been researched in a variety of occupational contexts such as: corporate business (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b), nursing (Speedy, 2005; Murray, 2010) and the military (Williams, 2005; Reed, 2008), as well as in education (Mahlangu, 2014). At the heart of much of the research has been the observation that "we may do well to consider workplace dysfunction and toxicity as normal - rather than as abnormal - phenomena of modern organisational life" (Walton, 2007: 19). If we are to accept that toxicity is a feature of contemporary organisational life, then how should we address it in the education system?

The toxic triangle

The model of the toxic triangle offered by Padilla *et al.* (2007) conceptualises the interaction between abusive leaders, vulnerable followers and their environment that leads to a

dysfunctional organisational culture and corporate underperformance. Travanti (2011: 131) offers three typical toxic managerial approaches, which are described as "the toxic micromanager, the toxic narcissist and the toxic bully.... Toxic leaders are characterised by fighting and controlling rather than uplifting and inspiring. They like to succeed by tearing others down". Importantly, for Mahlangu (2014: 313) "toxic leadership destroys a basic human sense of trust that is critical for working relationships and effective leadership in schools". At the heart of the discourse on toxicity is the issue of whether the prevailing occupational climate is responsible for the development of toxic styles of management or whether it is attributable to individual failings.

The imposition of New Public Management (NPM) over the public sector during the past two decades has impacted on public sector professionals, not least in the post-compulsory sector. The introduction of an audit culture, through the analysis of results data, assessment of lesson observations and annual staff appraisal, has led to the redefinition of teacher professionalism in the post-compulsory sector. This re-professionalisation of teachers and teaching has been described in terms of 'performativity' (Ball, 2003) and 'professionalism' (Gunter, 2002) and

has led to changing work relationships between managers and teachers. This redefinition of teachers' work, worth and identity has been identified by a number of researchers (Bottery, 1996; Gunter, 2002; Ball, 2003; Stoten, 2013) over two decades. It is within this 'pressured' situation where managers are expected to drive up continuous improvement where leader toxicity is likely to flourish.

The final element within the toxic triangle relates to the compliance of vulnerable employees. In their study of middle management in the Further Education (FE) sector, Shain and Glesson (2003) proffered a typology of compliance in response to change. The three categories of response encapsulate the reactions of FE teachers to the introduction of NPM managerial practices. The identification of 'willing compliance' (Shain and Gleeson, 2003: 236) amongst some staff recognises the reality that for some teachers this form of 'new professionalism' represents an opportunity for advancement which may chime with their own career goals. For others, there is only 'unwilling compliance' (Shain and Gleeson, 2003: 238) to the new contractual relationship that was imposed as a result of incorporation in 1993. According to Shain and Gleeson (2003: 240), the 'vast majority' of those surveyed reported 'strategic

compliance', in that although they implemented change, they rejected the business ethics that lay at its centre. Similarly, Stoten (2013) offered a similar typology based on the Russian revolution. In terms of strongest identification amongst teachers in Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) were the 'intellectual dissident', followed by the 'subjugated worker' and the 'young pioneer' - the careerist. The least identified ideal type was the 'ideologue' - the committed proselyte. Altogether, the research by Shain and Glesson (2003) and Stoten (2013) highlights the nature of compliance and followership within post-compulsory educational organisations, and the pressures to conform during a period of redundancy, high unemployment and uncertainty.

For Peters and Waterman (1982: 245), the real role of leadership is to manage the values of an organisation. As Gini (2010: 346) recognised, ethical behaviour is essentially a form of 'reflective conduct' - we often mould our behaviour to that of our environment. The absence of a values-based organisational culture is a major factor in the emergence of toxicity. Although Rawls (1985) argued that ethics is fundamental to collective life and serves as the basis of justice and equity, Fox (1994) questions its universality. In Ball's view of English education (2003: 211), modern professionals display a form of 'values schizophrenia' that, according to Freeman (1992), is the result of 'the problem of two realms', the business world and the ethical world clashing.

Reflecting on leadership values, power-relations and toxicity: a virtue ethics-based perspective

Virtue ethics has its origins in ancient Greece and the work of Plato and, more particularly, Aristotle. It is one of three main approaches in normative ethics. Whereas 'deontology' focuses on duties or rules and 'consequentialism' looks at the impact of actions, virtue ethics is primarily concerned with moral character and the performance of moral acts. The

three central concepts within virtue ethics are: virtue, practical wisdom and eudaimonia. In terms of virtue, this characteristic is supposedly permanent and not transient in nature. This ethical pre-disposition is tied to the practical wisdom of an act, and the development of collective happiness. So, a person who values professional integrity will adopt an approach that is honest and transparent, is at the heart of their daily practice and is recognised as such by others. Virtue ethics is more commonly associated nowadays with the work of MacIntyre (1985, 1999) and his view that ethics is inextricably linked to the idea of community and its 'ethos'. As such, MacIntyre's position can be criticised as essentially relativist in nature. Given the transient nature of cultural norms throughout history, critics question the validity of such an approach. Indeed, not only can virtue ethics be criticised as temporally dependent, it can also be seen as culturally specific as it reflects the dominant cultural values within any given society. However, notwithstanding these criticisms, the appeal of virtue ethics has a long history and still has appeal today. In general terms, a move towards a professional environment that is predicated upon the creation of a happier world is instantly attractive to many. It remains to be seen, however, how a virtue ethics-based approach could be reconciled with the techniques of NPM.

Tackling toxicity: what can we do?

Implementing a management system based on virtue ethics would challenge the dominant orthodoxy of line management in colleges that is based on technical-rational thought. Whereas virtue ethics is tied to the idea of moral character and moral actions, contemporary management practice is predicated upon the analysis of objectified data that reject a moral context. Take, for example, the judgments arrived at by Ofsted in its reports. Such reports are based on the statistical analysis of results data, lesson observations and other associated numerical information, and

do not claim to have an ethical remit. It is difficult to see how the education system can escape the 'iron cage of bureaucracy' in which decisions are supposedly taken on the basis of rationalism not morality. We should therefore, look to other strategies in the short term to address the issues of toxicity within educational institutions.

Tackling toxicity can be addressed through a sustained programme of cultural change within organisations that involves a range of 'hard' and 'soft' strategies for institutions and individuals that highlight the ethical context to professional practice. There are a number of actions that can be categorised under the heading 'hard' strategies that revolve around procedural innovation. Fundamentally, all change should be underpinned by a 'values statement' in which the ethical framework of the institution can be outlined. In recent years, many educational institutions have drafted such documentation together with their staff. In order to be truly effective, such initiatives need to be embedded within organisational culture, valued and adhered to. This statement of intent can be built on through the adoption of formal policies and procedures that aim to protect employees from retribution and encourage whistleblowing. This domain of formal policy is only credible if it is adhered to at all levels within the organisation.

In terms of 'soft' strategies, institutions can focus on relevant professional development for particular levels within the organisational hierarchy, or for specific individuals. The work by Goleman (1996) on emotional intelligence has led to a heightened level of awareness of the issues pertaining to the emotional context to work and the part played by management in promoting a healthy and productive work environment. As Day (2000) highlights, leaders should adopt the practice of self-reflection and critically evaluate how their behaviour impacts on others. The limitation on such practices is that emotional intelligence becomes yet another item of the institutional agenda.

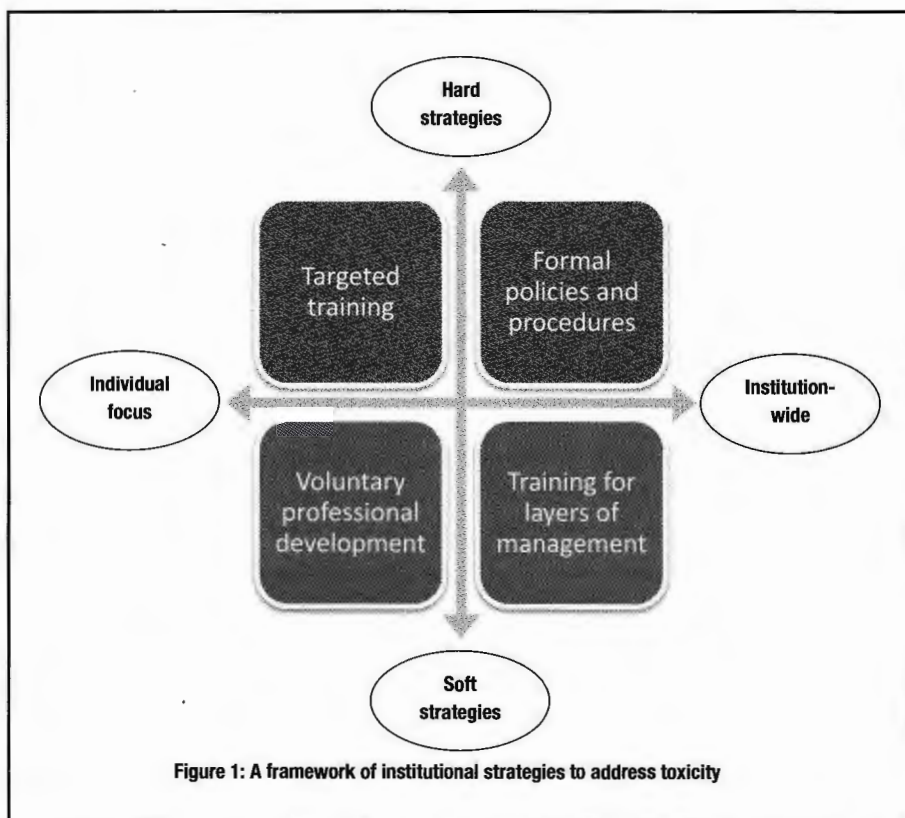


Figure 1: A framework of institutional strategies to address toxicity

For some observers, such as Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2010: 367), toxicity is inherently linked to the traditional, top-down transactional model of leadership. For such observers, a move to distributed forms of leadership that is based on the premise of shared leadership “promotes responsible leadership and accountability [and in doing so helps]... maintain ethicality” (Uhl-Bien and Carsten, 2010: 368). Although superficially the dispersal of leadership may appear appealing, it should not be undertaken without appropriate training of employees. If not, we could not guarantee that toxicity would not spread to lower levels within the organisation. Furthermore, Sixth Form Colleges remain largely hierarchical in structure with clear line management systems in place. The possibility of a substantial dispersal of managerial power within such institutions is remote. Finally, we could look to empowering all employees with the power of ‘upward ethical leadership’ (Uhl-Bien and Carsten, 2010: 371) wherein employees are encouraged through appropriate channels to challenge toxicity proactively. This approach is predicated on the idea of an empowered and confident workforce, confident in their power

to force through change. Given the persistence of the hierarchy-based line management power relations in Sixth Form Colleges, it remains to be seen how far such empowerment can be developed. Such a transformation in the asymmetrical power relations not only requires courage on behalf of employees, but also recognisable and safe procedures for combating toxicity.

Conclusion

Toxicity is a recognised feature of organisational life. The issue to hand is not its existence, but one of scale and impact. For critical observers, the transformation of the post-compulsory education system and the micro-management of professionals reflect a lack of confidence within the state bureaucracy to provide high-quality, low-cost services. The model of the toxic triangle (Padilla *et al.*, 2007) has been proffered to provide some conceptualisation of the pressures that exist within educational institutions, such as colleges. It is likely that the balance between external and internal pressures varies across the post-compulsory sector, but individual institutions should recognise the potential damage to their institution and their colleagues

from toxicity. This paper has offered some possible strategies to tackle toxicity. Fundamentally, however, the issue of toxicity must be acknowledged by senior managers and addressed through sustained action that transforms organisational culture (Wray-Bliss, 2011), and which is based on an ethical view of the workplace. One possible benefit of contemplating virtue ethics is that it offers an alternative way of conceptualising teaching and teachers’ work. Whether we can learn to adopt some form of ethical framework within the current education system, however, remains to be seen.

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