

Toxic Leadership: Three Lessons From Complexity Science to Identify and Stop Toxic Teams

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Toxic leadership behaviors undermine teams and lead to unsafe and unhealthy working environments. Leaders can help combat toxicity by understanding the causes through the lens of complex systems.

HEADING OFF TOXICITY WITH COMPLEXITY

Leaders of today's health care organizations are leaders of complex systems. Leadership in complex systems is very different from the traditional leadership styles prevalent in the hierarchal, industrialist health care systems of the past. Successful complex systems maintain many of the hierarchal structures while allowing for the evolution of a culture that recognizes the critical importance of informal networks, external pressures, and the impact of human behavior on an organization.² Leaders in complex systems cannot directly predict outcomes of behavior, but they can be intentional about how they act, and look for patterns of behavior that identify toxic pockets within their system. Inherently, toxic environments poison those that work within them, can stifle innovation, and are likely to lead to poor employee, patient, and organizational outcomes (*Table 1*).³⁻⁶

Toxicity at the system level manifests when teams stop collaborating, communication breakdown occurs, unreasonable goals are set, or excessive internal competition is encouraged.⁴ At the individual level, it occurs when people stop speaking up, encounter cultures of blame and passive hostility, spread misinformation, lose trust in leadership, shift to individual agendas, and when average performance is rewarded through low levels of accountability.^{3,4} Although most leaders do not intentionally create toxic workplaces, their lack of attention to certain aspects of leading can result in negative team interactions and ambiguity that lay the foundation for toxicity to flourish.⁵ Complexity science provides a lens for leaders to better understand how to seek out signs of toxicity.

Complexity science provides a lens to better understand the patterns of communication, interaction, and behavior in organizations that can differentiate a highly performing team from a toxic environment.¹ In the complexity systems view, organizations are seen as organic networks in which we embrace the irrational behavior that is human, view the workforce as matrices of highly interconnected people, and see that all systems are greater than the sum of their parts. This article provides a description of 3 complexity concepts and the resulting leadership actions that can help identify and head off toxicity in any team.

COMPLEXITY CONCEPT: INITIAL CONDITIONS

Given the right initial conditions, a butterfly that flaps its wings in Hawaii could cascade events that would lead to a hurricane in Florida. This is known as the butterfly effect and demonstrates that even the subtle starting conditions of a complex system can significantly influence the future trajectory of that system. In its most practical form, the butterfly effect is one way that meteorologists predict weather patterns and catastrophic events such as hurricanes. They look at initial conditions of pressure, temperature, and hundreds of other variables, and create models for what might occur in the future. Systems are made up of interdependent and interconnected people whose initial conditions create a ripple effect across organizations.

Leadership Connection

As a leader, initial conditions occur daily as you interact with teams and the larger organization (Table 2). The structure and frequency of meetings, the words you use to describe work, the information you choose to share or not share, and the trust you convey to your employees, all create initial conditions. Like the fluttering of the butterfly's wings, these will greatly influence the way in which your team will make decisions, interpret information, and engage in a culture of ownership. Complexity science tells us that small daily interactions such as one-on-one meetings, team huddles, and micro interactions (i.e., quick, informal conversations) can all align team trajectory much more than formal strategy, long e-mails, large offsites, and quarterly all-team meetings.

To add to the complexity, the personal behaviors of a leader will also contribute to initial conditions. For example, leaders who consistently work past normal business hours, send e-mails early in the morning or late into the night, and display reactionary decision making can create an unspoken culture that fosters unhealthy demands on the team and workplace norms. Employees are always looking for patterns of behavior that set the underlying expectations of a leader. Much like the ongoing data points that meteorologists monitor in order to predict the weather, your daily practices, beliefs, and subtle habits occur frequently and therefore create recognizable patterns that your team will interpret and then act upon.

The Toxic Link

The initial conditions that leaders set will directly impact the team culture, the leader's ability to connect with others, and the way in which teams view their value and worth in the organization. Toxic leaders can create initial conditions that rely on fear tactics, assertions of formal power, and disregard for their employees.^{3,4} This leadership style may achieve short-term outcomes, but at significant cost to the human teams and the long-term culture of the organization. In order for teams to feel valuable, they need to feel their input and ideas are valuable and included in leadership decision making. Teams who feel they are under threat or undervalued can create pockets of toxicity that metastasize over time. This is why it is so essential that leaders constantly assess their lead-

Table 1. Toxic Consequences^{5,6}

Individual	System
12% of victims quit	80% reported increased stress
48% decreased their work effort	78% reported decreased organizational commitment
63% lost time avoiding toxic person	High turnover rates
68% reported performance declines	Increased error and death

ership behaviors and how those are impacting the people they lead.

Anti-Toxin Tip—Tap your informal network for reflection: Leaders can use their informal network to receive feedback about their leadership impacts. Peers, teams, connections in other parts of the organization, even spouses, can help leaders reflect on how their actions might be interpreted. Seeking authentic feedback on an ongoing basis helps the leader stay connected to how they are perceived.

COMPLEXITY CONCEPT: ATTRACTORS

Complexity theory describes the concept of “attractors,” which can help leaders understand how unmanaged stress and drama-focused distractions in the workplace might lead to toxicity over time. In dynamic systems, the mathematical concept of attractors suggests any set of numerical values will evolve freely over time unless they encounter an attractor.⁷ When numerical values encounter an attractor, they stay close to it and no longer continue on their original trajectory.

Attractors can be better conceptualized through an example describing magnets. Imagine your team is a magnetic ball rolling toward a destination over time. Every once in a while, your team (ball) passes by a magnet on the right or left side and is pulled off their desired trajectory slightly. Small magnets (small attractors) only deviate that trajectory slightly, and your team's momentum can easily move them back toward the desired path. However, larger magnets (large attractors) can pull the ball completely off trajectory either temporarily or permanently.

Leadership Connection

In systems, the status quo is a strong attractor (large magnet) that can keep teams from reaching their desired trajectory. In the workplace, attractors are the daily disruptions, changes in strategy or leadership, lack of or withholding of information, and frequent interpersonal stressors that bombard teams. Some disruptions are small attractors, and some are large attractors. Regardless, it's the work of the leader to help create momentum, keep the team on track, and carve a path that addresses and avoids negative attractors. In addition, the complexity

Table 2. Daily Toxic Behaviors^{3,4}

Initial Condition	Toxic Behaviors	High-Performing Behaviors
<i>Communication and information sharing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Own information, are secretive, or share on a “need-to-know” basis -Excessive e-mails, meetings, or phone calls occur without actionable goals -Frequently repeat yourself, or need to ask members of the team for additional information -Team is unclear on your priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Information is shared widely, but is adapted for the audience -Sets clear strategic plans, goals, and vision -Fosters trust through transparency -Communication happens in micro interactions and allows team input -Members of team are clear on your priorities and expectations, and anticipate your needs
<i>Interactions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Employees avoid interactions with you or seem nervous -Not available to meet/talk -Employees do not speak up -Interactions are strictly work related, and do not acknowledge human side of team -Point out the mistakes of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ongoing employee engagement -Failure is not considered fatal -You’re never “too busy” for a team or their ideas/concerns -Interactions embrace the human side of employees—know and value your team on a personal level -Takes ownership of outcomes
<i>Work style</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Expect working nights and weekends to complete workload -Spend the majority of time on fire drills and immediate issues -Leader not present in work environment -Impatient, short tempered, and makes sarcastic remarks about others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Workload is balanced, and you promote a culture of self-care -Visible at the “front line” regardless if clinical or office setting -Ongoing positive reinforcement and praise occurs in micro interactions -Crisis is the exception, not the norm

leader is responsible for scanning the environment for attractors before they impact the team. Waiting to be derailed by an attractor, or not constantly scanning the environment for them, sets your team up for toxicity.

Leaders can take a few approaches that may be effective in mitigating the impact of attractors. One method is for leaders to decrease the strength of an attractor. This is done by sharing information and helping the team understand it in a way that lessens the stressor. By lessening the strength of the attractor, the team can deviate briefly and then continue on their desired trajectory. Another approach is for leaders to create a stronger temporary attractor that pulls the team away from the negative attractor. Temporary attractors can be focused sprints of work to solve the issue, describing a more attractive future state that keeps the team engaged in the long term, or reframing information about the stressor in a way that allows for more rational and informed decision making.

The Toxic Link

Stressors such as financial pressure, turnover, new work requirements, labor relations, and policy changes can be relatively large attractors for a team. Without intervention from the formal and informal leadership, team energy can get sucked towards large attractors and isolate them from the rest of the system as the team linearly focuses on their perceived stressors. Both inaction or incorrect actions can strengthen

attractors to pull teams further off course. As the interactions with the larger system decrease, the toxic energy of the stressor becomes concentrated. The magnet becomes stronger over time in the absence of a leader who can guide the team back on track. In these conditions, staff are likely to become dispirited and turn over. Those employees who stay may be in line to become the team’s next toxic leader.⁴ Over time, toxic leaders can influence the development of a culture of toxicity to emerge in your organization.

Anti-Toxin Tip—Many times, leaders make the mistake that withholding information or communication during change will help the team “not worry.” This practice can actually create more toxicity. In the absence of information systems (teams) will fill the gaps, often times with rumors, misinformation, and drama that may increase stress and poor decision making.

COMPLEXITY CONCEPT: HUMAN BEHAVIOR

In times of change, stress, or uncertainty, nature has pre-programmed humans to activate the “fight or flight” sympathetic nervous system. Teams are made up of humans, and therefore, they display these associated characteristics daily. Specifically in times of stress, leaders and teams can develop catecholamine-induced tunnel vision, hypersensitivity to interactions, and the desire to isolate themselves from the rest of the system. Without some intervention within the

Table 3. Influencing Attractors as a Nurse Leader

Attractor (Stressor)	Strengthen Toxic Attractor (Team Begins to Deviate)	Weaken Toxic Attractor (Team Stays on Trajectory)
<i>Reorganization or turnover</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Silence or avoidance -Generic or vague announcements -Ambiguity in describing new work or roles -No input from team on how to adapt to change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Transparent information -Frequent “micro” updates -Illustrate the impact of new work -Engage team in change planning and decision-making process
<i>Significant workload increase</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -“Doing more with less” -Wishing for more time -Ambiguity in length or scope of increase -Leader not present in the work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reallocation of resources -Team-based solutions -Describing time bounds of temporary increases -Leader helps team in completing the work
<i>Urgent high stakes issue (legal, business, safety, HR)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Secrecy and opacity of information -Not addressing cause -Exaggerating urgency or impact. -Blaming employees for a leadership failure -Crisis is the norm, the team never moves past immediate needs to long-term goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Focused resources -Review of system impacts -Debriefing ways to avoid in future -Transparency in impact -Clear responsibilities and roles to address issue

HR, Human Resources.

team or by the leader, stress can lead teams to gravitate away from their work and focus only on the immediate situation. Although in the short term this may seem protective, in the long term, this creates focused toxicity and team stagnation as the team isolates itself from the information and relationships of the rest of the system.

Complex systems are made up of individual, but interdependent, people, known as actors, who organize into teams and systems in order to accomplish work.² In the past, organizational theory assumed actors always made rational decisions when given choices by leadership. For example, when a leader would offer higher wages for more work, it was assumed that the actor would rationally say yes. However, in a complex system view of an organization, actors are known to also be irrational and sometimes unpredictable. Much like the concept of attractors, organizational norms and structure can increase the likelihood of irrational and unpredictable behaviors in teams and individuals.

Leadership Connection

One constant cause of unpredictable behavior occurs when teams are left without adequate information to make informed and rational decisions. Leader behavior and communication serve as some of the most influential variables by which teams make decisions.⁸ It is important to remember that some attractors are hidden and are only recognizable by the patterns of human behavior in the actors that surround them. This means the cause of stress might not be known,

and the actor’s behaviors are the only clue that an issue even exists. Many times, hidden attractors can be uncovered by scanning for rumors or awkward behavior as critical or sensitive information is shared.

As an actor yourself, teams will scan your behaviors, actions, and words for patterns with which they use to form interpretations. These interpretations lead to assumptions and eventually become deeply held, shared beliefs among individuals, teams, and sometimes the larger organization.⁹ Whether the assumptions are reality based or not, leaders should constantly scan for interpretations formed by teams and determine whether negative interpretations are acting as a toxic attractor.

Toxic Link

Leaders should address toxic pockets as soon as they recognize them, otherwise toxic attractors will fester and grow. Acting from an objective place, the leader should refrain from reactionary or punitive behavior when addressing a negative attractor. If negative attractors have formed, both the leader’s reaction and their ability to create a stronger positive attractor is critical. It is also important to know that this scanning takes time, effort, and relationships. To find the most dangerous attractors, leaders must be communicative, connected through meaningful relationships, and present in the work with their teams. To avoid toxicity, leaders must acknowledge the complexity of human behavior, and the importance of their role as an attractor in the daily lives of their team.

NONTOXIC LEADERSHIP

Complexity leaders are strong attractors in their organizations, and constantly assess the environment looking for patterns of human behavior which can give some insight into the future successful or toxic behaviors that might arise. As mentioned previously, leaders must keep in mind their team is constantly assessing their daily behaviors, the way they provide focused leadership both horizontally and vertically, and the degree to which they share transparent information on a regular basis.

Viewing an organization as a complex system empowers leadership to reduce toxicity in their teams. By understanding the impact of initial conditions, the presence and power of attractors, and the impact of communication to a team will help leaders be more conscious and intentional about how they interact on a daily basis. By working to decrease toxicity in teams, nurses can hope to experience less horizontal violence, better health and well-being, and more joy in the work they do. If toxic work environments are not constantly identified and addressed, then our profession, our patients, and our colleagues stand to suffer greatly. **NL**

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