

A military chaplain with scandalous stories of toxic commanders made me wonder whether the same toxicity exists in the Church.

Gillian Flynn presents a descriptive definition of a toxic leader as a “the manager who bullies, threatens, yells. The manager whose mood swings determine the climate of the office on any given workday. . . .The backbiting, belittling boss from hell. Call it what you want — poor interpersonal skills, unfortunate office practices — but some people, by sheer shameful force of their personalities, make working for them rotten” (Gillian Flynn, “Stop Toxic Managers Before They Stop You,” Workforce, August 1999).

## **Pictures on Her Desk**

In one school, the secretary followed the principal’s policy of only one picture on her desk. Since she arrived before all the teachers and met with the principal about the day, she would set out one picture. If the principal was in a good mood, it was her son and his family. If the principal was in a bad mood, it was her son in Marine uniform. If it was an exceptionally bad day, he was in combat uniform. As teachers arrived, they looked for the picture to check on the environment. On exceptionally bad days, they fled to the hills.

If an administrator’s moods set the tone for the day, there is toxic leadership.

Examples of toxic leadership are easier to come by than definitions. A toxic leader is first and foremost motivated by self-interest. This interest can be in terms of self-aggrandizement or a response to very low self-esteem; concern for others is not a priority. This can easily be explained by their concern for getting the job done — no matter who gets hurt.

With employees feeling that they are not important, they do not put forth effort, so the toxic leader then uses techniques to improve efficiency by lowering morale even further. There once was a principal lacking self-esteem or confidence, so in hiring new employees, she would share with them her great vision to make a new and better school.

## Forgot the Vision

Once the contract was signed, she would on a regular basis find examples of how the new teacher failed to live up to that vision. Instead of pointing out the successes, she found every little fault to criticize. The teachers became so concerned about those little details that they forgot the vision and just tried to keep their heads above water.

As the quality of education decreased, the principal knew it was poor teaching. So, each school year, she either fired or encouraged teachers to quit. Within two years, 50 percent of the teachers had been replaced. You had discouraged teachers being joined by soon-to-be-discouraged teachers, and the quality of education continued its downward spiral.

These employees suffered from toxic stress. Stress is part of every job, but here is good stress and bad stress. Athletes getting ready to compete have physical and emotional stress. Each morning I make up my day's "to do" list, knowing that on some days I will not even get the first item done because of a critical event reported when I arrive. This is what makes my job exciting and why I am happy to go to work, even though it is stressful. There are also stresses outside the job.

Pastors and other church leaders can cause negative stress, which is toxic. A pastor more concerned with the visible short-term goal of redecorating the sanctuary than the invisible long-term goal of empowering staff to build a congregation of active members will cause negative stress.

A pastor is the bishop's or God's representative in the parish. This vision should inspire concern for the spiritual well-being of the parish family, especially the staff. Staff need to be known. A DRE, in a parish for two years, was in the parish office with his wife, registering their children for religious education classes. The pastor came into the office and welcomed the wife to the parish, expounding how he had decorated the church, how he had improved the liturgical life and how he surrounded himself with the best parish staff in the archdiocese. Then he asked, looking at the DRE, "Is this your husband?"

If the majority of the staff sees the pastor or principal as arrogant and self-serving, it is a toxic environment. If he is seen as inflexible or petty, it is also toxic. Sometimes, employees might think that the most wonderful thing to watch is a superior with an "it's-my-way-or-the-highway" attitude get his way and then have it blow up in his face.

## Two Letters

Once there was a pastor who, upon appointment, wanted his own staff and not that of his predecessor. He demanded that all employees write two letters, one of resignation and one of application. He said he would accept all the resignations and interview the employees for their position.

As required, the DRE submitted both letters. The DRE then learned that his position was not secure because the pastor's sister, a religious, was an experienced DRE in another parish and the religious community was in both parishes. The DRE learned this because the secretary showed him the pastor's letter to the religious superior asking for his sister, the religious sister. The DRE went looking for other jobs.

The sister's community had a policy against their religious working for relatives, so denied the pastor's request. The pastor then told the DRE that he could have his job back. The DRE informed the pastor that he had accepted a position in another parish. The pastor was unable to find another professional DRE for two years. During that time, he paid the former DRE a consultant's fee for that time period to guide the volunteers on the program!

## Extreme Measures Sometimes

Maybe that pastor was right to try to get a staff that would work for him and not carry the past pastor's vision forward. Sometimes, in extreme situations, extreme measures are needed. A teacher replacing a teacher who has failed to teach and maintain order may come in like a military commander with an in-charge attitude.

An archbishop came into office following a very popular predecessor who decided not only to stay in the area, but also invited his former staff over for lunch. The new archbishop made the staff justify every

existing program in detail. At the end of each presentation, he would decide if the program would continue as is, be modified or be discontinued.

The staff resented both the extra work and what they considered the new archbishop's arbitrary attitude. What was unknown to the staff was that the archbishop was learning in detail about all the programs and making a personal investment in the work of the office. These were his programs now, even if they were exactly the same as his predecessor's, changing from toxic to tonic, from negative to positive.

Some leaders remain toxic. It is said that toxic leaders build their careers on the carcasses of those who work for them. It is their goal to get a better leadership position. It is a sad note that subordinates sometimes make them look good just so they will go up and out, the Peter Principle. Further, since subordinates will never say anything bad about them, it appears they are good leaders. Subordinates act like abused children, making sure that they can postpone the next case of abuse.

## **A 360-degree Evaluation**

As long as the Church uses the hierarchical model, toxic leadership can be permitted to remain. The Army is heading in a different direction. It is called a 360-degree evaluation program. Evaluation is done by superiors, equals and subordinates. Putting this in a parish perspective: pastors would be evaluated by the bishop or priest personnel board; neighboring pastors; their office staff; their professional staff; their parish council; their finance council and parishioners selected by the pastor. This would be done anonymously.

For a principal, the evaluation would be done by the pastor or school board; neighboring principals; office staff; teachers and students selected by the principal. For a DRE, the evaluation would be done, by the pastor; catechists; youth minister; neighboring DREs; office staff and students selected by the DRE. The reason for the selection of some is that, while the person to be evaluated makes the selection, those doing the evaluation are the ones who will be subordinate to this person. Subordinates want competent leaders because their happiness

and security depend upon it. This is then put together by an uninterested party.

## **Climate Evaluation**

Another method is a climate evaluation. Rather than looking at specifics, it looks at the work environment. How many sick days do people take? How often are they late, even if it is just a minute? How often do they work late without pay? Do they volunteer for school or parish activities? Do they contribute ideas in brainstorming sessions? Answers to these can be the same and show the opposite results. A toxic leader may have employees coming to work sick because they are afraid of being fired, while a tonic leader's employees will come because the work needs to be done. It is then you look at morale to determine the climate.

The workplace should be a foretaste of heaven, not hell.

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