

THE TOXIC LEADER VS. THE GENERATIVE LEADER

In our previous blog, we discussed how toxic leaders operate in a world of scarcity, thinking he or she is in constant danger of lacking scarce, precious resources like power, recognition or affirmation, creating self-centeredness. We also discussed how the toxic leader afflicts the organization. If you haven't had chance to read *The Toxic Affliction*, do so now.

Having read the first part of this series on toxic leadership, you will know that the toxic leader afflicts the organization in one, fundamental way: operating out of their personal affliction, they in turn afflict the organization with a decidedly "leadership unfriendly" ethos of scarcity that undermines the emergence of the next generation of leaders. But, how do you know if a leader is really toxic? Perhaps the best way to identify this affliction is to compare and contrast the toxic leader with his or her healthy counterpart, the generative leader.

THE GENERATIVE LEADER.

The practice of generativity in top leaders demands a rare combination of personal attributes associated with emotional maturity, especially generosity and wisdom.

Researcher Daniel McAdams suggests that the practice of generativity involves the creative blending of both intimacy and a healthy power motivation. In the act of generativity, the leader both creates something of value and willingly gives it up on behalf of others, surrendering control over that which they themselves have produced.

As McAdams notes,

"Generativity challenges us to be both powerful and intimate, expansive and surrendering at the same time. In motivational terms, generativity draws on our desire to be strong and our desire to be close to others, mandating that we integrate and reconcile power and intimacy motivation."

Generative leaders believe the welfare and progress of the organization depends on the contribution of generations to come, and so the best thing they can do today for the organization today is to identify and develop more leaders. As the saying goes,

"Anyone can count the seeds in an apple. Only God can count the apples in a seed." Or, "If you want a crop for one year, grow corn. If you want a crop for ten years, grow trees. If you want a crop for 100 years, grow men and women."

The toxic leader stands in sharp contrast to the generative leader. Like their alpha cousin, instead of generously sharing resources, the toxic leader turns the organization into a constricted and withholding place.

They view emerging leaders as competitors for scarce resources such as recognition and rewards, perquisites and power, and so poison the “organizational soil” to protect these resources from would-be competitors. This “poisoning” takes a variety of forms—withholding personal support, hoarding valuable leadership prerogatives and denying or rationing precious and scarce resources, especially information. Consequently, the encouragement, trust and flow of resources so fundamental to the emergence of new leaders are tightly controlled and cautiously rationed, if shared at all.

SUMMARY AND IMPACT

Most organizations embody a natural law that applies to all living organisms—plants, animals and humans alike: when resources are scarce—or perceived as scarce—competition and conflict abound. Both the alpha and toxic leader reside in a world of scarcity, and consequently, are acutely attuned to this competitive reality. While the toxic pattern is less overtly competitive than the alpha pattern—wolves are more aggressive than pine trees—the result is the same. The toxic organizational soil makes it difficult if not impossible for new leaders to take root and grow.

The organization will eventually manifest what Erikson calls a

““pervading sense of stagnation and personal impoverishment.”

This has disastrous consequences for the organization, as unused resources have a way of vanishing, and human resources are no exception. Emerging leaders will soon get the message—you are not valued. Many will depart for organizations with a more generous climate. And of course, like the alpha, this suits the toxic leader just fine.

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