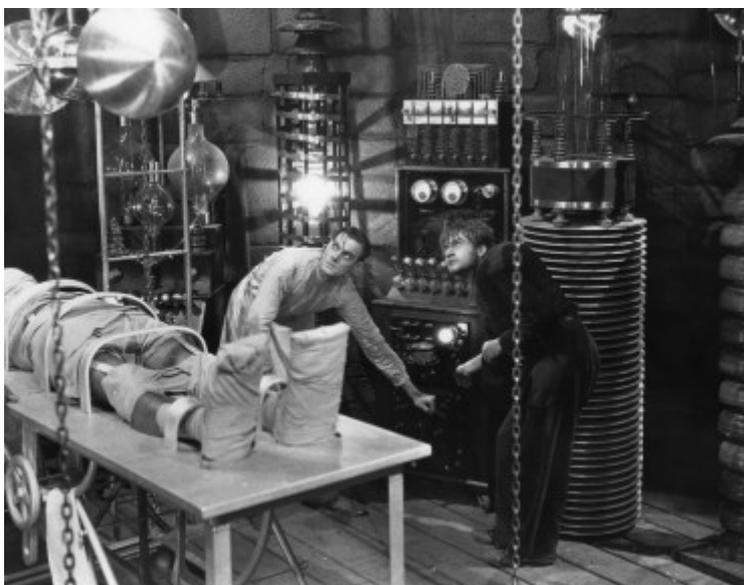


“A Way” To Develop a Toxic Leader: How We as Leaders Create Our Own Monsters



Toxic leaders don't just appear on the scene, they develop over time- and we are the ones that create them. Yep! It's partly our fault as leaders because we fail to properly counsel them as they move up the ladder.

There you have it: “A way” to create a toxic leader.

So, I think it's important for all of us to learn how **not** to build our own Frankensteins.

In his book, *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*, Morgan McCall Jr opines that “Believing the fittest will survive without much nurturing, organizations not only overlook people with potential to develop but also frequently and unintentionally **derail the talented people they have identified as high flyers by rewarding them for their flaws, teaching them to behave in ineffective ways, reinforcing narrow perspectives and skills, and inflating their egos.**”

Let's look at the career of Colonel Toxic. As a platoon leader, Second Lieutenant Toxic was the star performer. He was physically fit, tactically sound, and his platoon was the top performing platoon in the battalion during his assignment. He pushed his Soldiers to

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extremes and demanded unwavering obedience. When he received his evaluation report, he was commended for his hard work with a superior rating. He was the number one platoon leader! Overtime continued success brought with it arrogance, insensitivity, and an overbearing leadership style. This rising star continued on this path for 23 years, until his brigade command. And that’s when it all fell apart. His command climate surveys became abysmal. His battalion commanders and staff officers were fearful of open communication, and everyone walked on egg shells when he was in the area. His organization was compliant, but not effective. He had obedience, but not buy-in. And so it goes, another promising military leader falls off the pyramid.

Is there anything we can do as leaders to keep the next Frankenstein from rising off the table?

Counsel, Counsel, Counsel: Counseling is our greatest weapon against creating monsters. Sitting down once a month or quarter with a subordinate to discuss performance (success and failure) is instrumental in their development. Just about everyone desires honest feedback, but rarely is it given.

Identify and highlight character flaws: Many of us overlook character flaws (insensitivity, overbearing, etc.) when successful outcomes are achieved. While this might not play a critical role in organizational performance at lower levels, this could severely impact performance at higher levels. Our star performer is still our subordinate and a fellow member of our profession, so that means it’s our job to help them become aware of developing character flaws. It’s nothing personal-it’s professional.

Scrutinize success just as much as failure: In the mind of your subordinate, their iron fist approach to leadership is what earned them a stellar performance evaluation. Morgan McCall Jr. says “seemingly stellar track records don’t always reveal who (or what) actually played the major role in a successful outcome, nor do they always show how results were

achieved.” By helping them closely examine the causes of success, a leader may help a subordinate understand it wasn’t necessarily the authoritarian approach that made the unit successful, but it was several factors working in combination together, and maybe they performed well not because of the approach, but in spite of it.

Teach reflection: Reflection turns our key developmental experiences into lessons learned and provides us with the opportunity for introspection. Many top performers bounce from running assignment to running assignment, rarely taking a knee. As leaders we can use counseling opportunities and even writing assignments to provide this reflection space. (I’m reflecting on my own character flaws as I write this.)

There is no training regimen that will reprogram a toxic leader after 20 years of service. So let’s do our job as leaders and take the time to deliberately develop our subordinates.

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