Toxic Celluloid: Representations of Bad Leadership on Film and Implications for Leadership Development

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This article relates seven cinematic examples of toxic leadership to the purpose of explaining how the practitioner might use them for leadership development. The article begins with an explanation of toxic leadership before a discussion about how film might be used for development. The main body of the article centres on the depiction of toxic leadership in seven films (Path to War, The Bounty, Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, Swimming with Sharks, The Smartest Guys in the Room, Erin Brockovich and Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire) prior to an explanation of their usage in developmental settings.

KEYWORDS: Toxic leadership, ACE framework, cinema, incompetence, rigidity, intemperance, callousness, corruptness, insularity and evilness, toxicity.

Introduction

The notion of toxic leadership can dichotomise the discussion of leadership into images of good and bad leaders. In doing so, it can mask the complexity of toxic leadership and promote simplistic leadership analysis. To avoid this trap in a developmental environment, we advocate the use of feature films as these can be selected to show a more subtle and complex picture of toxicity. Keeping the development practitioner’s perspective in mind, this article identifies and critically reviews seven cinematic examples of toxic leadership; the goal being to provide a set of examples that practitioners can use in developmental settings. Seven films have been chosen to illustrate each one of Kellerman’s (2004) seven dimensions of ‘bad’ leadership: Incompetence (Path to War), Rigidity (The Bounty), Intemperance (Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan), Callousness (Swimming with Sharks), Corruptness (The Smartest Guys in the Room), Insularity (Erin Brockovich) and Evilness (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire). These films are individually described using Walton’s (2007) ACE framework which brings out the interplay between the actors, the context and the environment in shaping toxic leadership. The article ends with some suggestions for how these films might be used in a developmental setting.
Toxic Leadership

The phenomenon of 'toxic' or 'bad' leadership has been articulated from a number of different perspectives. Firstly, it has been described as a psychological problem. This perspective centres on toxic or bad leaders possessing a narcissistic personality. Narcissists, as Maccoby (2000) suggests, are independent and not easily impressed. They are innovators and are driven in business to gain power and glory. In a toxic sense, this leads to a sensitivity to criticism, poor listening skills and a lack of empathy. However, there are also positive sides with regard to leadership, where narcissistic leaders tend to have good visionary ability and are able to attract followers (Maccoby, 2000). This is a direction explored by Lipman-Blumen (2005) who asks the question, why are followers attracted to toxic leaders? Lipman-Blumen argues that these leaders appeal to people's deepest needs, playing on their anxieties and fears, on their yearnings for security, high self-esteem and significance, and on their desire for noble enterprises and even immorality. This suggests, therefore, that followers hold a level of responsibility for toxicity in leadership, something that is explained by the work of Kellerman (2004).

Kellerman's (2004) conceptualisation sees 'leadership' as a relational perspective, in that it involves followers as well as leaders and suggests that seven dimensions of 'bad' leadership exist (Kellerman, 2004: 40-46):

- Incompetence—the leader and at least some followers lack the will or skill (or both) to sustain effective action. With regard to at least one important leadership challenge, they do not create positive change.
- Rigidity—the leaders and at least some followers are stiff and unyielding. Although they may be competent, they are unable or unwilling to adapt to new ideas, new information, or changing times.
- Intemperance—the leader lacks self-control and is aided and abetted by followers who are unwilling or unable to intervene effectively.
- Callousness—the leader and at least some followers are uncaring or unkind. Ignored or discounted are the needs, wants, and wishes of most members of the group or organisation, especially subordinates.
- Corruptness—the leader and at least some followers lie, cheat, or steal. To a degree that exceeds the norm, they put self-interest ahead of the public interest.
- Insularity—the leader and at least some followers minimize or disregard the health and welfare of "the other"; that is, those outside the group or organisation for which they are directly responsible.
- Evilness—the leader and at least some followers commit atrocities. They use pain as an instrument of power. The harm done to men, women, and children is severe rather than slight. The harm can be physical, psychological, or both.

Before explaining how Kellerman's dimensions might be illustrated using films, it is important to note Kellerman's warning that we must explore context as well. To take account of this, we will be using Walton's ACE Framework to describe the presentation of toxic leadership in our chosen films. This framework explores the issue of toxic leadership from a wider perspective and promotes analysis through three lenses—behaviour, context and environment (Walton, 2007). Walton's ACE framework and Kellerman's dimensions provide useful tools when exploring toxic leadership on celluloid. Film enables us to explore the concept in a wider context than that of just 'the leader'; it enables us to explore context, environment, as well as leader-follower relationships and behaviour.
Development through film

Over the past ten years, there has been an explosion of interest in using cinema to examine management and leadership behaviour. Indeed, so much so, that film is now seen as a core part of the armoury of management developers. When feature films are used for leadership development, the learners do more than just see things with their own eyes; they can richly interact with the unfolding drama. Directors design their feature films to engage the viewers and use various tricks and techniques to draw viewers into the plot and to warm to the characters. Compared to television programmes, this is a more urgent endeavour. In films, the engagement has to be almost instantaneous, which has obvious benefits for using these tools with practitioners as they are drawn into the process very quickly. Film vividly and captivatingly brings leadership to life; think of the ‘I am Spartacus’ scene or Maximus (Russell Crowe) rallying his troops at the start of Gladiator. Such compelling material encourages the individual interpretation of leadership situations. The way that people respond to these scenes helps them understand themselves and this, in turn, encourages practitioners to find their own understanding of leadership.

Furthermore, although most feature films are either fictional or directors’ interpretations of real events, most endeavour to portray realistic human behaviours even in fantasy settings. Hence, films are not just open to varying interpretation, but they can mirror the complexity of human behaviour. Films can vividly show the interplay of thoughts, emotions and desires, people’s development and transitions, the relationships between individuals and interactions with environments, and the ambiguous nature of causality, which accords with Walton’s (2007) ACE framework. In short, there is a richness and complexity to the portrayal of leadership on the screen that is difficult to replicate with any other medium.

Cinematic Representations of Toxic Leadership

Having set the scene, the remainder of this article describes how feature films can be used for illustrating toxic leadership with practitioners. Each section begins with a concise synopsis of the plot, followed by an explanation of how the dimension of bad leadership is portrayed in the film bringing out the interplay of actors, contexts and environments in the manner advocated by Walton (2007). Each section ends with a list of other films that could be used to illustrate the same dimension of bad leadership in case the developer seeks alternatives or wishes to highlight different aspects of the concept.

Incompetence (Path to War, 2002, John Frankenheimer).

Synopsis. Path to War dramatically recreates the events in the White House during the 1960s as the USA became more deeply involved in the Vietnam conflict. In particular, the film follows the decision-making of Lyndon B. Johnson (Michael Gambon) who, after being elected with the biggest majority in US history, stumbles step-by-step into a protracted war that derails all his other policies. The film follows the key moments in the war, drawing out the decision making that led America to these points.

Toxic Leadership. In this film, Johnson is sympathetically depicted as a well-meaning and bright person who wants to do the right thing. He does not want Americans to die—he desperately worries about every man he sends into battle and personally signs every death notice to families—and he wants to help the people of South Vietnam. But he lives in the shadow of Kennedy’s ghost: “President Kennedy did not lose Vietnam and I’m not going to lose Vietnam.” He wants to ‘nip it in the bud’, but the guerrilla war escalates and the decision makers in the White House are unaccustomed to fighting revolutionary soldiers in a jungle. He uses reason to make decisions, but fails to realise the
passion and the 'hearts and mind' drive of the opposition. The backdrop to the war decision making is the social rights movement, anti-poverty legislation and later, the anti-war campaigns. In this film, incompetence is portrayed as an error that bright and well-meaning people can fall into when the circumstances place them in a situation that they are detached from and do not understand properly.

Alternatives. Incompetence is depicted in many ways. It is ridiculed in films like Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Oh! What a Lovely War, Trading Places and Anchorman, but taken more seriously in Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, A Bridge Too Far and The Charge of the Light Brigade.

Rigidity (The Bounty, 1984, Roger Donaldson).

Synopsis. The Bounty is the third cinematic retelling of the mutiny on HMS Bounty during the ship's voyage to Tahiti in 1787-1789. The core of the film focuses on this voyage which, by and large, was uneventful, followed by an account of the three months in which the Bounty stopped over in Tahiti. During this stopover many of the crew develop relationships with the local girls. Towards the end of this visit, Bligh (Anthony Hopkins) realises his crew has lost a lot of its discipline, so he clamps down and tries to re-institute naval behaviour on the ship. This ultimately leads to mutiny.

Toxic Leadership. In this version of the story, Bligh is portrayed as an archetypal British naval commander who maintains discipline with excessive punishment. Nevertheless, his character is written sympathetically as an individual trained and brought up in the English naval tradition of authoritarian leadership. To some extent, Bligh is portrayed as a victim of the system. However, his desire to circumnavigate the globe is shown as a personal weakness because it threatens the safety of the ship. In addition, his prudishness and overreactions are depicted as character flaws.

Despite all these factors related to Bligh, the film suggests that the causes of the mutiny do not lie simply with Bligh's authoritarian clamp-down on leaving Tahiti, but with the contrast of the discipline with the idyllic lifestyle the sailors had led on the island. These sailors were used to the discipline, but following three months of paradise their expectations and motives had changed and they were primed to mutiny.

Alternatives. Similar plotlines can be found in Crimson Tide and Battleship Potemkin where rigidity causes uprising. In a similar vein, the community leader in Pleasantville is shown as a rigid and inflexible individual trying to rally the community to resist change.

Intemperance (Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, 1992, Nicholas Meyer).

Synopsis. As the second Star Trek film, The Wrath of Khan develops a story that first appeared in the TV show. In the original programme, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) had captured and exiled super-humans from a eugenics war to a remote planet. When the USS Enterprise revisits the area some years later for scientific testing, Kirk comes face-to-face with the remnants of the exiled superhumans, led by Khan Noonien Singh (Ricardo Montalban). The luscious uninhabited planet Kirk had exiled them to had shifted in its orbit and become a desert. Khan seeks revenge on Kirk and uses his enhanced intellect to plot the exiles' escape. He obtains the upper hand over Kirk, but rather than withdraw when damaged, he keeps tracking Kirk to gain his revenge, which ultimately leads to his, and his crew's, doom.

Toxic Leadership. Khan is a leader with very high levels of physical and intellectual power. When he uses these, he succeeds. But he comes undone when emotion takes over. Kirk gains the advantage because he is able to antagonise Khan and play to his emotions. In this state, Khan's intelligence is overridden by his emotions and his intemperance comes to the fore. This portrayal of intemperance is particularly interesting.
because it is the product of more than personal weakness. It is fuelled by the years of exile on a desert planet during which time Khan broods about the man who consigned him there; Kirk. Hence, this is a more complex depiction of intemperance than commonly depicted in celluloid and it is interesting that it is the weakness that brings down an otherwise brilliant leader.

Alternatives. Other examples of cinematic intemperance leadership flaws include Sonny (James Cann) in The Godfather, Calvera (Eli Wallach) in The Magnificent Seven, Captain Michael Brennan (Nick Nolte) in Q&A, and Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) in Gladiator.

Callousness (Swimming with Sharks, 2003, George Huang).

Synopsis. Swimming with Sharks is a satire on the Hollywood film industry. The key idea underpinning the film is that the quickest way to the top is on the coat tails of a major player. Guy (Frank Whalley) joins a production studio as the personal assistant to Buddy (Kevin Spacey). Buddy is depicted as an extremely callous manager who revels in insulting everyone around him: "My bath mat means more to me than you do". Guy grows tired of the constant abuse and humiliation and eventually kidnaps and tortures Buddy, whose job and persona he acquires.

Toxic Leadership. Buddy's callousness is encapsulated in one particular scene early in the film. It is Guy's first day in the company and Buddy asks him for Sweet 'n' Low to sweeten his coffee. Guy cannot find any and brings him Equal instead. Buddy responds with the following diatribe: "Do me a fucking favour. Shut up and learn. Look, I know this is your first day and you don't really know how things work around here, so, I will tell you. YOU HAVE NO BRAIN. No judgement calls are necessary. What you think means nothing. What you feel means nothing. You are here for me. You are here to protect my interests and to serve my needs. So, while it may look like a little thing to you, when I ask for a packet of Sweet 'n' Low, that's what I want. And it is your responsibility now, to see that I get what I want. Am I clear?" This extract can be interpreted in several ways. The most obvious is that Buddy has no concern for Guy's feelings. Another is that Buddy knows exactly how this will impact on Guy's feelings and he is doing it deliberately to bully him into subservience. In any case, Buddy's callousness is presented as a personality flaw. Interestingly though, when the previously mild-mannered Guy becomes an executive, he adopts the persona of Buddy which raises the question of whether it is the person, the place, or the interplay of the two that creates such callous behaviour.

Alternatives. A very similar role to Buddy is Miranda Priestley (Meryl Streep) in The Devil Wears Prada, who indulges in near-identical abuse of a new personal assistant. Other examples are Bill 'The Butcher' Cutting (Daniel Day-Lewis) in The Gangs of New York and Gordon Gecko (Michael Douglas) in Wall Street.

Corruptness (Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room, 2005, Alex Gibney)

Synopsis. This documentary charts the rise and fall of Enron, an oil trading company that became one of the greatest corporate scandals in American history. The filmmakers use interviews, along with corporate audio and video to describe both the reasons behind the company's extreme lifecycle and the impact it has had on people, both inside and outside the corporation.

Toxic Leadership. As a portrayal of corruptness, this film projects the notion of a 'moral vacuum' upon the minds of Enron's senior executives and the capitalist system in which the organisation operated. Although the executives are shown as money-grabbing and heartless, they are also shown as victims of a business environment where increasing profits have to be delivered every year.

Alternatives. There are many alternative films that can be used to illustrate corruptness.
These include *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Chinatown*, *L.A. Confidential*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *The Untouchables*, *American Gangster*, *Scarface*, *The Big Heat* and *Hoffa*.

**Insularity** *(Erin Brockovich, 2000, Steven Soderbergh)*.

**Synopsis.** Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts) is a twice-divorced single mother who, desperate for work, joins a small legal firm. She soon discovers a series of devastating illnesses in a local community that she is able to link to contaminated water being deposited by a California power company. Erin Brockovich works with the community to file a suit against the power company, which they win.

**Toxic Leadership.** In this film, the polluting corporation is only seen through its deeds: the pollution of a local community and their attempt to hush it up, and the behaviour of their lawyers. In this way, the director (Steven Soderbergh) depicts the executives of the corporation with the same insularity in which they regard the community they are destroying. These are faceless executives whose evil intentions are amplified by their absence. In terms of learning and development, this absence is fascinating as it allows the viewer free rein to ponder the behaviour and motives of the insular organisation.

**Alternatives.** Other films that depict insular leadership include *Gandhi* (i.e. General Dyer and the massacre at Amritsar), *Thirteen Days*, and *Roger & Me* (although Roger Smith’s insularity appears to be a contrivance of the director).

**Evilness** *(Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 2005, Mike Newell)*

**Synopsis.** *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is the fourth of the Harry Potter series. In this film, Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) and his friends are in their fourth year at Hogwarts School for Magicians. One of the first scenes in the film is the Quidditch World Championship which is interrupted by the appearance of Death Eaters, followers of the evil Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes), who wreak havoc and bring fear to the world of wizards. The main plot line in the film is based around the Triwizard Tournament in which the champions of three wizard schools must compete. Harry finds himself in the tournament and has to confront several life-threatening challenges. When he finally reaches the prize, along with Cedric Diggory (Robert Pattinson), the two are whisked off to confront Voldemort in a classic good-versus-evil fight.

**Toxic Leadership.** The menace of Voldemort is a theme running throughout this film; his very name striking fear in the hearts of wizards who dare not speak it. Although Voldemort is an extremely powerful wizard, he has been weakened by his clash with Harry (and his parents) when Harry was an infant. Still weakened, he must remain hidden. However, the memories of his past deeds still haunt the wizard world. A few symbolic deeds, such as the havoc at the Quidditch World Championships, encourage his past followers who band together again and spread fear of Voldemort’s return.

When Harry comes face-to-face with Voldemort at the end of the film, Voldemort’s evilness is displayed when he kills Cedric and Harry barely escapes with his life. In the series of films (and books), Voldemort’s evil is depicted as a wizard with great ability who was corrupted by his power. This is an evil person who attracts followers by playing to people’s weaknesses of greed and ambition.

**Alternatives.** Examples of other evil leaders in films include Adolf Hitler (Bruno Ganz) in *Downfall*, Genghis Khan (Omar Sharif) in the eponymously titled film, Idr Amin (Forest Whitaker) in *The Last King of Scotland*, Darth Vader (James Earl Jones and Keith Prowse) in three *Star Wars*’ movies, and Sauron in the three *Lord of the Rings*’ movies.
Concluding Remarks

The selected movies were deliberately chosen to illustrate how feature films from a wide variety of backgrounds can be used to illustrate the variety, prevalence, complexity, pervasiveness and dysfunctionality of toxic leadership. The range of genre includes fantasy, science fiction, historical drama, contemporary drama, dramatic reconstruction and documentary. These films portray toxic leadership in different ways including reports of actual events, dramatic scenes of toxicity, and films where the toxicity is in the background. By choosing this wide range of films, the purpose was to give the leadership developer a sense of the variety of opportunity afforded by using feature films.

In all cases, the toxicity illustrated in these films defies easy explanation. Each viewer will interpret the characters, contexts, situations, causations and implications differently. In doing so, the use of these films allows the developer to situate toxicity in relation to the learners’ own values and attitudes thereby making what can be experienced as a theoretical subject far more personal and relevant.

The films can be used in different ways. Perhaps the most natural way of using films is to show clips to illustrate aspects of toxic leadership as a prompt for discussion and application to the organisation in question. An alternative approach, which increases the viewer’s involvement, is to ask practitioners to study the whole film prior to a development session guided by questions (see Billsberry and Gilbert, 2008).

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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