

How to spot and prevent toxic leaders in the church

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DALLAS—Toxic leadership in the church has been on full display in recent years, a Dallas Baptist University dean told participants in a Nexus Leadership Conference breakout session.

That particularly was true in the case chronicled in the *Christianity Today* podcast, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, said Blake Killingsworth, dean of the Gary Cook School of Leadership at DBU.

The podcast describes the devastation that occurred at Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Under the leadership of founding pastor Mark Driscoll, the church had become widely known as an exemplar of the Young, Restless and Reformed movement.

Killingsworth pointed out the Christian tendency observed in the podcast, to platform someone “whose character really was not developed enough to handle that level of celebrity or that level of authority.”

“We platform these people all the time, because we kind of want the celebrity pastor,” Killingsworth said.

It didn’t take much time to begin to see that same kind of problem as happened at Mars Hill start to develop “here, there and everywhere else,” Killingsworth observed.

To identify toxic leadership, Killingsworth noted a need to understand leadership in general.

Using leadership expert Peter Northouse’s definition that “leadership is the process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve

a common goal,” Killingsworth listed several legitimate types of leadership.

Leadership can be transactional, transformational, charismatic, authentic, adaptive, servant-leader or incarnational. These describe the type of influence the leader is leveraging to move toward a common goal. Toxic leadership also is a type of leveraging influence.

He pointed out that just because a leader might be seen as “difficult” does not automatically mean the leader is toxic. Likewise, “driven” does not necessarily mean toxic.

A toxic leader doesn’t just hold a group to high standards to get a desired final product. If a leader is truly toxic, “there’s something else going on there.”

Unfortunately, many leaders today do qualify as toxic. Killingsworth, noted the book *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb: Searching for Jesus’ Path of Power in a Church that Has Abandoned It*, by Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, points to a danger with leadership.

He said the book notes “leadership of any kind will always be alluring to unhealthy, domineering, narcissistic individuals.”

Killingsworth pointed out that “we know this,” but hearing it helps illuminate the truth that some leaders didn’t seek that position for benevolent reasons.

Toxic leaders

The book explains, “a toxic leader is someone who maintains power and significance by manipulating followers through their own fundamental drive to be powerful and significant.” And they dominate and control.

“Toxic leaders wield their personalities to submit their power, relegating

their followers to positions of dependence upon them, rather than on Christ.”

Killingsworth said toxic leaders think they’re the Messiah, whether they realize it or not.

Toxic leaders subvert the systems designed to hold them accountable. And they establish scapegoats to blame for their failures, he said.

“Think about how many times you’ve seen a toxic leader say: ‘Well, that was the guy before me. I warned him,’” he continued, noting that if someone is the leader, that person takes accountability instead of passing blame.

Killingsworth said the book notes a toxic leader doesn’t develop other leaders beneath them, because they would pose a threat to their own power. But healthy leadership is going to develop other independent leaders to share in the mission, whereas the toxic leader opts for “cronies” and “yes men.”

Toxic leaders create an “unhealthy symbiosis,” so the organization collapses without them. They are deceptive, manipulative and dehumanizing.

But “we platform them,” because they promise to “quote, ‘keep us safe, anoint us as special, and offer us a seat at the community table,’ end quote. We want a sense of safety, security and belonging that they are offering it in exchange for loyalty,” he read from the book and expounded.

Those who platform toxic leaders put trust in the leader to provide these things that rightfully belong to Christ, Killingsworth said.

Killingsworth listed the traits of a toxic leader as:

- Intimidation.

- Bullying or ridicule.
- Manipulation—either of circumstances or people, pushing themselves to the head table.
- Micromanaging—to take credit for others’ work.
- Arrogance and pride.
- Narcissism—“I’m the center of the universe, and you’re not.” Childish and immature.
- Abusive behavior—for example, reports of LBJ making his aids take notes for him while he was on the toilet.
- Unethical behavior—manufacturing “grey areas,” when it’s actually black-and-white.
- Shaming.
- Passive aggressive.
- Sabotage.

Platforming toxic leaders results in shallow growth, shell-shocked people, trauma and abuse and often the collapse of the organization, Killingsworth said.

“The toxic person has a bad result every single time”—even though they never fail to see themselves as anything less than “the greatest,” he said.

Guiderrails

Brent Thomason, dean of the Graduate School of Ministry at DBU, offered guidelines to help prevent toxic leadership traits from developing.

Thomason said the observable traits of toxic leaders are symptoms of deeper sins that need to be dealt with. He prompted participants to consider what those root sins might be to head off movement toward toxic behaviors in their positions of leadership.

Just as the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis

3:6), church members can be enticed today when what the toxic leader offers seems “good for food,” (physical), a delight for the eyes (emotional) and “desirable for making wise” (intellectual)—tempting in all these areas.

Killingsworth noted organizations platform toxic leaders for a variety of reasons. It may be out of complacency, because “we just don’t want to mess with it.” This can cause the organization to justify and ignore toxic behaviors in leaders, enabling them to go unchecked.

A desire for prestige can also be a factor in platforming toxic leaders. Someone is seen as exceptional and capable of taking the church to that next level, like a football player who performs on the field, but brings dysfunction in his personal life.

“We desire success so much, that we don’t care about the process to get there,” Killingsworth said, “not realizing God is interested in the process.”

“We can blame the (toxic) guy at the top, but we ourselves are just as culpable for it as they can be, ... when we’re just complacent, all we care about is results, and we don’t even think through the process,” he said. “We just care about results.”

In addition to cultivating the virtues described in the fruit of the Spirit, Thomason noted guardrails are necessary to help build a culture that doesn’t invite toxicity.

Killingsworth identified several corporate virtues that help create guardrails against toxic leadership:

- Prayer—asking God to “reveal my heart” and praying for the organization.
- Central mission—Ask if everything being platformed and celebrated is building that mission.
- Have a plurality of accountability—leaders who are accountable to

each other, “back-and-forth.”

- Create “feedback loops” for peers, subordinates and some who are not your direct reports to communicate with one another and offer godly critiques. “When the light is shined everywhere, the roaches will scatter.”
- Create good human resources policies—“We should be better than everybody else” at working with each other, even difficult people, “because we have the gospel,” Killingsworth observed.
- Pray some more.

He asked: Does your organization celebrate the ethics of God’s kingdom—meekness, salt and light, being driven by love (1 Corinthians 13)?

EDITOR’S NOTE: The last section was edited after it was originally posted to correct the misspelling of Brent Thomason’s name.