

# **IDENTIFYING TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN THE FIRE SERVICE**

Research Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Executive Fire Officer Program

by

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## Abstract

Leading in the fire service is challenging; being a great leader in the eyes of firefighters is equally challenging. In all literature reviewed, the level of leader-member exchange, psychological and physical safety, community safety, and organizational performance were first- and second-order effects of effective and toxic leadership. Existing literature regarding toxic leadership defines characteristics, traits, and behaviors in general terms; however, few works apply toxic leadership specifically to fire service leaders. Qualitative research examined whether fire service employees correctly identified toxic leaders in the fire service. Moreover, could firefighters differentiate the effectiveness of toxic leaders and if a firefighter's worldview and generation group affected their ability to identify and differentiate toxic and effective leaders? The purpose was to consider and incorporate interview responses of a sample group (n=15) of randomly selected firefighters in balanced position groups ranging from basic firefighter to chief fire officer. The primary instrument used to obtain qualitative information consisted of a battery of interview questions presented to participants. Responses and experiences were integral to comparing known generic toxic leader traits and behaviors to those of toxic fire service leaders. Research results from this study showed that firefighters reasonably understand toxic leadership, which has been shaped by their lives, varied backgrounds, and experiences. This study presented a foundation to build on that increases the fire service's ability to support community resilience through effective teams and customer service delivery. For this research, the written use of the term *firefighter* is synonymous with all firefighters, regardless of agency position.

*Keywords:* Leadership, toxic, effective, behavior, characteristics

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There is no smooth paved road that you can travel carefree to your goals, dreams, desires, and finish line. You will need supplies, friends, family, contingency plans, a lot of elbow grease, sleepless nights, and a touch of luck to succeed in your endeavors. In the end [perhaps] it was me that created the roadblocks and built the barriers that slowed me down; it was me that made the excuses as “reasons why.” I stood in my own way and had to get past ‘me’ to move forward.

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**Contents**

Abstract .....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
List of Tables .....	7
List of Figures .....	7
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	9
Identifying Toxic Leadership in the Fire Service .....	9
Background.....	9
Significance of the Study .....	10
Problem Statement .....	11
Purpose Statement.....	12
Research Questions .....	13
Summary .....	13
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	15
Introduction.....	15
Existing Literature .....	16
Synthesis of the Existing Literature .....	25
Summary .....	28
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	29
Introduction.....	29
Research Design.....	30
Population and Sample Size.....	31
Instruments.....	32
Research Process.....	35

Ethical Considerations .....	37
Summary .....	38
CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS .....	40
Introduction – Demographics of the Participants .....	40
Research Results .....	45
Summary .....	68
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	71
Summary of the Results .....	71
Conclusions Based Upon Results .....	74
Limitations .....	78
Implications and Recommendations to the Field.....	79
Recommendations for Future Research .....	81
Conclusion .....	82
REFERENCES .....	84
APPENDICES .....	92
Appendix A. Email to Air Force Fire Chief for Research Participants .....	92
Appendix B. Interview Consent Form .....	94
Appendix C. Participant Data Masked Demographics Record.....	96
Appendix D. Respondent Data-Masked Respondent Sorting.....	97
Appendix E. Random Sequence Numbers Used for Selection.....	100
Appendix F. RQ1/IQ2 - Summary of Participant Responses .....	101
Appendix G. Coded Interview Results RQ2/IQ4 .....	104
Appendix H. RQ2/IQ5 - Summary of Participant Responses.....	107

Appendix I. Coded Interview Results RQ2/IQ6 .....	110
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### **List of Tables**

Table 1. Universal Truths of a Good Leader .....	16
Table 2. Fourteen Leadership Qualities .....	21
Table 3. Research Interview Questionnaire .....	34
Table 4. SAMPLE: Respondent Initial Sorting List .....	36
Table 5. Respondent Totals .....	40
Table 6. Participant Response Correlation to 12 Universal Truths .....	49
Table 7. Participant Response Correlation to 14 Leadership Qualities .....	50
Table 8. Emerging Themes Differentiating Effective and Toxic Leaders.....	54
Table 9. 10 Qualities of Accountable Leaders.....	59
Table 10. 10 Toxic Leader Deficiencies in Accountability .....	60
Table 11. Millennials and Toxic Leadership Emerging Themes.....	62
Table 12. Multi-Generational Interpretations of a TL .....	63
Table 13. Generation X on TL, Applied to Millennial and Generation Z .....	64
Table 14. Participant Generational Make-Up vs. TL Encounters.....	65
Table 15. Sequential Emerging Themes and Empirical Data.....	73

### **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Respondents by Position .....	41
Figure 2. Respondents by Service Affiliation.....	42
Figure 3. Participants by Agency Position Group .....	43
Figure 4. Participants by Age .....	44
Figure 5. Participants by Generation Group .....	45

Figure 6. Toxic Leaders Experienced Over Career ..... 51

Figure 7. Toxic Leaders Experienced Over Career by Age Group ..... 52

Figure 8. Toxic Leaders Experienced Over Career by Agency Position..... 53

Figure 9. Toxic Leaders Encountered by Generation ..... 66

Figure 10. Toxic Leaders Heard About by Generation ..... 67

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Identifying Toxic Leadership in the Fire Service

Ask any firefighter in any department (i.e., paid, combination, or volunteer) about their experiences with fire service leadership toxicity. You will hear firsthand or hearsay stories of interpretive examples of toxic environments, peers, and leadership. With an almost unending list of factors that drive firefighter perspectives on toxic leadership, it is difficult to identify clear and concise characteristics of fire service toxicity. Today the firehouse-hold phrase toxic leadership is the all-encompassing terminology used to describe malicious, self-absorbed, conceited, abusive, destructive, and narcissistic behavior and mannerisms exhibited by who Brunacini (2012) would consider a boss, yet acknowledge as also leaders and managers. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) noted that all people hunger for power and control at differing levels, at times disproportionately to others that can lead to power-hungry fueled attempts at goal attainment but at the cost of losing sight of the actual goal. Is this a link to what breeds toxic leadership in the fire service? Regarding the fire service, leaders, managers, and bosses identify as the executive, chief, senior, and company fire officers who lead firefighters in daily tasks, community services, and emergency event mitigation.

### Background

A targeted review of general leadership texts from 1990 to 2015 showed the virtual inexistence of toxic leadership to identify leader dysfunctionality in the fire service workplace. Compounding the issue further is the lack of fire department journals and other literature identifying and characterizing toxic leadership in direct correlation to the fire service. The lack of empirical and theoretical fire service data concerning toxic leadership has led to categorizing a

leadership style without adequate grounding. For example, Satiani and Satiani (2022) suggested that no workplace is devoid of toxicity, finding that 95% of interviewees identified at least one toxic characteristic in others at work, in addition to citing evidence of up to “30% of toxic leaders in the global industry” (p. 23).

Not just the individuals but the palpable noxious environments their toxicity created and the poisonous followers they created and supported. Burns (2017) defined constructive and destructive leadership before referencing the distinctly harmful destructive leadership subgroups, abusive leadership, bullying, and toxic leadership. Burns further revealed that toxic leaders regularly display self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, and authoritarianism. Evaluating the fire services’ understanding and ability to define and identify toxic leadership within the walls of fire stations aligns with the 21st Century Fire and Emergency Services White Paper. Identifying toxic leadership compliments “Critical Issue B: Culture” and the three subordinate initiatives (CPSE & ICMA, 2020, pp. 11-12).

### **Significance of the Study**

The need to study and define toxic leadership within the walls of our fire stations and administrative sections exists. Defining toxic traits and characteristics in the fire service extends across numerous aspects, from recruitment and retention to human capital management and the administration and execution of regular and emergency services delivery. Wolor et al. (2022) stated, “The results of this study indicate that toxic leadership affects job satisfaction and motivation. Similarly, job satisfaction influences employee motivation and performance” (p. 7). Through the study of illustrating and classifying toxic leadership across our fire service enterprise, we enable the continued evolution of a profession of public and organizational

servitude; we stand a greater chance of increasing firefighter job satisfaction and desire to serve, which increases motivation and performance.

The consequences of toxic leadership (i.e., leadership failure) are significant and include consequences to the individual firefighters, the department or agency, the customers and stakeholders, and the legacy of those mentioned above. Bjorge (2020) noted four additional consequences arising from leadership failure in a department: “increase in firefighter injuries and risk of a line-of-duty death, poor morale, going rogue, and ‘raising’ the next generation of poor leaders” (paras. 13-17). This generic qualitative method study will model executive fire officers’ development from the beginning of their careers to retirement, empowered with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to avoid leadership pitfalls and align with four central themes.

First, effectively exercise leadership of self through balanced lives and work ethos, leading to success as an individual and professional (R5201 EEL-S). Second, understand how and can create and foster a resilient, safe, healthy, and prepared organization from its current state to its desired state (R5202 EEL-O). Third, effectively comprehend their departments’ role in building resilient communities through active participation, trust, and influence, and creating and advocating for public policy that meets strategic goals (R5203 EEL-C). Lastly, use active participatory practices and various research methodologies to evaluate and validate statistical, empirical, and emerging data to benefit the firefighters, customers, and communities the officer serves while avoiding leadership pitfalls and toxicity.

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem to be addressed is whether firefighters at all levels can identify toxic leadership in fire service leaders. Winn and Dykes elucidated that warning signs exist and allow

employees to identify toxic leaders (2019). We know that toxic leadership characteristics, traits, and behaviors are as detrimental to the fire service as other industries. We know toxic leadership in general trades, office environments, and businesses has been researched thoroughly. A clear nexus of toxic leadership traits has yet to be made for fire service leaders. Jenkin identified leadership accountability as not placing blame but rather empowering employees to complete their work by sharing plans, objectives, and means to achieve the desired outcome (2014). The specific problem to be addressed in this study is whether firefighters in various agency positions, length of service, and experience levels of the fire service identify the characteristics, traits, and behaviors of a toxic fire service leader.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to use generic qualitative research methods to understand toxic leadership in the fire service further. The study explored firefighters' ability to correctly identify toxic leaders' characteristics, traits, and behaviors. The intent of the research was to evaluate known characteristics of toxic leadership examples outside of the fire service and apply traits and attributes of toxic leadership to fire service leaders. Specifically, this study evaluated participant positions, experience, years of service, and generational differences to determine firefighter understanding of toxic leaders and the ability to correctly identify toxic leaders. Providing a clear understanding of toxic leadership in the fire service results in the development of influential leaders to execute mission objectives and goals while ensuring the care, stability, and growth of firefighters efficiently and effectively at all career levels.

### **Research Questions**

This study will use generic qualitative research methods to answer the research questions. Research questions are open-ended to solicit more profound thought and explanation, intending to help better understand the perspectives of firefighters at varying levels within their department.

Research Questions:

RQ 1 - How accurately are firefighters able to identify the characteristics of toxic leadership?

RQ 2 - How do firefighters differentiate the effectiveness of those not demonstrating toxic leadership?

RQ 3 - Do generational perspectives or worldviews affect an individual's interpretation of toxic leadership?

### **Summary**

Summarizing chapter one, an introduction to identifying toxic leadership in the fire service was presented as the focus of this research project. Examples of toxic and poor leadership exist in work centers across various trades, careers, and military organizations; however, research into leadership toxicity in the fire service is unexplored with specificity. Therefore, the problem explored in this research is identifying and defining toxic characteristics of fire service leaders as a general qualitative study to explore the subject further and determine a firefighter's ability to understand and identify toxic leadership traits. The research problem was divided into three research questions.

The following chapters will include a literature review, research methodology, study results, and conclusions and recommendations. The literature review in chapter two will analyze

scholarly articles and relevant research as a foundation for research. The literature review is also beneficial in identifying toxic leadership in the fire service. Chapter three captures methods and procedures to collect, analyze, and interpret research data with the ability to recreate the study accurately. The strategy discussed in chapter three will highlight the critical framework components of research into leadership toxicity.

Chapters one, two, and three cover the groundwork and need for the research, chapter four will present the results and findings. Chapter four will tie back to the problem and purpose statements that were presented. The results will include any demographics delineating participant groups while maintaining anonymity. Any themes or trends that support the research project will be presented and expanded upon in chapter five. Chapter five will briefly reflect on chapter four's key findings and expand by interpreting the data and results. This chapter will also explain the results' relevance and how they can assist the fire service, whether through knowledge increase or application by fire service leaders. Finally, a recommendation on how fire service leaders can avoid being labeled as toxic leaders will be presented using the research in previous chapters as validation.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Kraines (2001) noted the need for effective leadership accountability including psychological contracts necessary to align workers and managers into a framed contract where each level is accountable, where each “has a responsibility for the resources they need in order to produce desired outcomes” (p.136). Hill et al. (2022) explained how great leaders demonstrate vulnerability, inclusiveness, and open-mindedness, taking the team to a strategic destination, actively listening, demonstrating humility, showing empathy, acting as a catalyst, and coaching, mentoring, and leading, even walk side by side, in the right moment to achieve goals.

Jenkin (2014) tied leadership to accountability in a model where leadership focuses on employees and leaders sharing an understanding of methods, a means to an end, objectives, and plans. Accountability uses the empowerment of employees at all levels through collective recognition of tasks, how to carry them out, and agreeance on what a successful outcome looks like. This literature review will examine existing literature on common leadership styles and explore these styles, identify attributes and characteristics of good leadership styles, discuss how misusing leadership style attributes leads to employee abuse, and review how the lack of good leadership allows poor then toxic leadership styles to exist. This literature review will focus on identifying toxic leadership in the fire service and tie general toxic leadership to specific characteristics and behavior attributed to toxic fire service leaders.

Arany and Popovics (2022) stated universal truths regarding good leaders, shown in Table 1, that transcend all leadership styles and positions within an organization. Using universal truths on leadership as a generic foundation of good leader characteristics, the study can better address the problem through a qualitative study with research and capturing firefighter responses

gleaned during interviews with open-ended questions. Furthermore, the research data collected in this study will evaluate the ability of subordinate and peer employees to identify these characteristics accurately. Gandolfi and Stone (2022) argued that understanding how toxic leadership differs from abusive and destructive leadership is incredibly important when examining toxic leadership in an organization. Therefore, the findings will serve as enhanced understanding of identification of characteristics of toxic leaders in the fire service.

**Table 1**

*Universal Truths of a Good Leader*

<b>Characteristics of Good Leaders</b>	
Treats People Well	Knows People Well
Has Excellent Professional Skills	Communicates Well
Can Manage	Is Brave
Has Perfect Control Over the Team	Full Responsibility
Patience and Understanding	Leads People the Way the Leader Wants to be Led
Service	Has Mostly Extroverted Personality Traits

**Existing Literature**

Ivanov et al. (2021) argued that common leadership styles share five essential traits to be successful: planning, new ideas, flexibility, accountability, and treatment of subordinates. The authors also identified that good leaders focus on and practice collaboration as a standard tenet to help the team achieve goals and avoid pitfalls. We must look backward first to understand contemporary leadership. Wren (1995) discussed leadership’s beginnings in the 1900s as the great person leader concept. This changed in the 1940s when the understanding of leadership behavior was studied and used to train others to exhibit specific qualities. Additionally, Wren

(1995) noted that 30 years of continued research determined that integrated task direction with a relationship between leader and followers did not yield great leaders as expected.

Wren (1995) captured that the 1940s to 1970s leadership studies were abandoned to focus on situational factors that determined characteristics and behavioral factors more closely defined leaders. More to the point that a follower-leader relationship was necessary for leaders' success, particularly citizen leaders of our communities. These relationships entailed quality collaboration, exchanges, and interchanges as facets that lead to a "deeper sense of responsibility and a higher sense of authority that comes from the trust others have bestowed informally upon them to act on behalf of the group" (p. 13). Shifting to contemporary leadership styles, focusing on the behavioral component and leadership traits will lead to identifying good and bad leadership styles.

Blake and Mouton (1985) developed the managerial grid with four positions based on paternalism and maternalism to describe management styles. The axes (X and Y) represent extremes of paternalism (Y) and maternalism (X). The four management styles are 9,1 - the exacting taskmaster; 1,9 - the tender-hearted man; 1,1 - the involved and withdrawn leader; and 5,5 - the sociable, amenable manager. Northouse (2019) expanded Blake and Mouton's managerial grid and designed a leadership grid including five behavioral-based leadership styles with predictive productivity outcomes. The axes (X and Y) represent Concern for Results and Concern for People, respectively, creating the relevance of each of the five styles. The first, Authoritarian-Compliance (9, 1), emphasizes a controlling leader who demands challenging work, has little connective communication with employees, and overpowers others to achieve task or job completion. Second, Country-Club Management (1, 9) opposes Authoritarian by emphasizing communication with workers to meet social and personal needs. The third is

Impoverished Management (1, 1), where a leader acts apathetic or indifferent and demonstrates low concern for worker relationships and the job or task.

Northouse (2019) continues with Middle-of-the-Road Management (5, 5) as fourth, where high levels of compromise for workers and the task are exhibited. This leadership style focuses on an equilibrium of moderate production, conflict avoidance, and moderate interaction with employees. Lastly, the fifth style is Team Management (9, 9), that strongly emphasized both employee-leader relationships and meeting task or production demands. With the five behavioral leadership styles explained, it is important to highlight other common types of leadership, such as the situational approach, where the leader gives distinct levels of direction and support depending on the situation of both the leader and the employee.

ElKordy (2022) stated that transformational leaders push subordinates to set ambitious goals, challenge the status quo, use creativity to solve problems, and take risks. Burns (1978) specified that transformational leaders use charisma to influence followers and increase goal pursuit through inspiration, motivation, and stimulation to raise both leaders and followers to elevated levels of morality, motivation, and mutual relationships. In contrast to the transformational style's high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX), the Authoritarian Leadership model is highly focused on hierarchy and strict compliance with rules and directions. Wang et al. (2019) stated that the authoritarian style stresses unconditional obedience and exerts supreme authority over followers with little ability for employees to question or break the tight control placed over them. In the authoritarian style, hoarded information is used as power, employee suggestions are ignored, and the employee is not empowered to make decisions, and inferior performance leads to punishment.

In contrast to the authoritarian style is servant leadership, where the emphasis is placed on the employee and ensuring personal needs are met first, along with collaborative processes that build transparency and create an LMX that leads to ownership, greater engagement, civility, cooperation, and create a strong sense of community (Sarkus, 2022). Furthermore, Sarkus (2022) further focused on the impact of servant leadership on the safety community. He noted that, with the attributes previously mentioned, when a psychologically safe environment was achieved, employees were more apt to share safety concerns and eliminate injuries and fatalities in the workplace. The presence of adequate LMX also occurs in transactional leadership.

Transactional leadership is an agreement between leaders and followers using agreed-upon terms (Young et al., 2021). Through reciprocal agreements, “positive leadership behaviors induce followers to return favorable treatment to the leader, creating a dyadic exchange that affords followers resources for downstream follower motivation and behavior” (p. 3).

Considering the high involvement of transactional, authoritarian, servant, and transformational leadership styles, laissez-faire leaders’ approach to leadership roles is on the opposite side of the leadership spectrum. Wellman et al. (2019) noted that laissez-faire passive leader behaviors include being very unlikely to engage in any leadership behavior, even in the face of severe problems, and significantly affect role clarity, perception of leaders, and employee job satisfaction negatively.

The challenges of any leadership style are the proper application, the proper situation, and the right moment. Additionally, each has varying levels of LMX geared toward technical challenges. Hernández-Santiago and Pérez-Rivera (2022) discussed how organizational change is an adaptive challenge that is best suited to be led by adaptive leaders. Northouse (2019) summarized the work of Heifetz and his associates in pursuing a leader seen for their ability to

assist others in addressing problems and solve them versus a leader who is a knight in shining armor, individually directing the resolution of challenging problems. Though past performance and successful application of corrective actions give a potential for future success, they are not guaranteed. Hernández-Santiago and Pérez-Rivera (2022) proposed that future success is tied to open-mindedness, employee participation in the brainstorming, planning, and execution phases, along with leadership that is amenable and adaptive to open discussion of problems in the organization and employee idea generation without judgment.

Regardless of typology and methods, all leadership styles share an ethical responsibility to act, act in good faith, and demonstrate good leadership characteristics and traits. Leaders must create an environment where everyone is encouraged, like anyone standing next to them (Hill et al., 2022). In addition to carefully crafting culture and capability, employees must trust their leaders. Concerning trust, Huntsman and Greer (2019) captured aspects of leadership taken from military studies that influence follower trust, such as credibility, fairness, emotional stability, benevolence, competence, integrity, ability, and confidence.

Leaders are defined as good or bad based on their qualities, characteristics, and attributes. Arany and Popovics (2022) discussed that leaders had played an essential role in developed and undeveloped societies since the beginning of time. As the world has evolved, so have the qualifications and criteria for defining a leader. Arany and Popovics also noted that much of the work defining leadership traits had helped determine leadership potential. Tremaine (2022) added complexity to defining leadership by observing that position within the organization, past experiences, demographics, diversity (i.e., worldview), and exposure influence an employee's interpretation and ranking of leadership traits and characteristics.

Tremaine (2022) identified leadership qualities in his work at the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) (Table 2). Building on Tremaine’s list, Vardiashvili (2022) adds honesty, vision and inspiration, communication, decision-making and delegation of authority, courage, justice and kindness, knowledge and competence, creativity, sense of humor and optimism, and intuition in addition to the need for leaders to possess a high emotional intelligence level. Emerging as valued more post-Covid than before the pandemic, Vardiashvili added cultural intelligence, resilience, and empathy to his previous leadership qualities.

**Table 2**

*Fourteen Leadership Qualities*

<b>Leadership Qualities</b>	
Leads by Example	Develops Self & Others
Effective Communicator	Builds & Nurtures Trust Relationships
Competent	Credible
Displays Respect & Support for Others	Behavior Aligns with DAU Values
Critical Thinking	Exercises Authority & Decision Making
Promotes Collaboration	Maintains DAU Enterprise Perspective
Change Agent	Innovator

Scholarly literature for leadership qualities in company, senior, chief, and executive fire officers is minimal, requiring leadership qualities identified in general terms and like-type organizations such as the military and other public servant careers. Though paramilitary organizations function differently than an office environment, basic tenets of leadership remain. Askew (2022) noted that from an ethical standpoint: virtue, authenticity, openness, transparency, altruism, self-restraint, perseverance, and humility) are added to the list of leadership qualities. The importance of ethical and good leadership cannot be ignored, and when compared to unethical or harmful leaders, the negative traits glaringly stand out.

Burns (2017) noted that when leaders demonstrate constructive leadership, they focus on mission accomplishment, generate cooperation, create consistency, make the team more confident, push in a collective direction, and strive to achieve the greater good. In contrast, destructive leaders undermine the organization's goals, motivation, and resources through systematic and repeated behavior. Burns continued that this can include throwing things, harassment, failing to protect subordinates or withholding information, and even physical acts (i.e., slamming fists on tables or shoving). Slightly different than destructive leaders, abusive leaders are one of three types of harmful leadership styles that also include bullying and toxic.

Burns (2017) characterized abusive leaders as using "injurious actions that include public ridicule, angry tantrums, inconsiderate actions (e.g., rudeness), favoritism, non-contingent punishment, and coercion" (p. 35). Tepper et al. (2004) identified how abusive leaders affect organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), with the perception of a supervisor's use of verbal and non-verbal behavior in a hostile manner and whether displayed frequently and regularly. Bullying often includes an imbalance of power where the parties are involved, and expressly the target is limited in their ability to defend against bullying attacks or retaliate (Einarsen et al., 2009). Onorato (2013) would agree adding that a bullying leadership style includes sabotaging an employee's work, constant criticism, verbal abuse, picking on an individual based on the choice of clothing, and offensive conduct or behavior (e.g., threatening, humiliating, intimidating). The remaining harmful leadership style is toxic, which is the focus of this study.

Gandolfi and Stone (2022) presented that toxic leadership is not just one trait but a culmination of multiple components that lead to toxicity. This is important as toxic leaders will misuse different good leadership styles in an unethical manner or combine destructive and abusive traits with meeting their needs. Webster et al. (2016) stated that toxic leaders

demonstrate behaviors that include “intimidation, bullying, manipulating (Machiavellianism), micromanaging, narcissism, and engaging in abusive and unethical behavior” (p. 346)—the toll of toxic leadership on employees’ manifests in emotional exhaustion, extreme stress, and burnout.

Ivanov et al. (2021) captured how toxic leaders apply key leadership characteristics. Toxic leaders thwart cooperation by inciting and stressing competition; they act rigidly, hate new ideas, and blame others for organizational issues. Toxic leaders cannot plan efficiently, doubletalk, and do not care about those they lead, often abusing and misusing their followers. Satiani and Satiani (2022) agreed with Ivanov et al. and add behaviors demonstrated by toxic leaders as bullying, abuse, intimidation, and aggression. Additionally, Satiani and Satiani also noted that toxic leaders lie, shift blame, are inconsistent, drag up past employee faults, have poor communication outside their tight circle, and hoard information. Moreover, toxic leaders act selfishly, act more talented than others, display 180-degree behavior when supervisors are around, manipulate situations and employees, and use deceit.

The importance of understanding that toxic leaders work for themselves and are known for working against organizational goals, thriving off a dysfunctional environment they control in inappropriate and unethical leadership (Winn & Dykes, 2019). Reed (2004) stated that toxic leadership presence was increasingly visible in businesses and organizations. Reed continued stating that toxic leadership was like poison to a unit, that toxic leaders were indifferent to unit climate and rationalize their behavior, as necessary. As a result, Reed stated toxic leaders are likely to act on critical issues if results are provided to supervisors, only acting for self-interest and benefit.

Williams (2019) stated, “A toxic leader is not necessarily the stereotypical screamer but more often appears to be a pleasant and talented individual who has subtle ways of degrading and exploiting others for personal gain and takes pleasure in doing so” (p. 56). This is an essential characteristic of toxic leaders, as not all are overtly toxic; the subtle and hidden actions of talented toxic leaders can go unnoticed for years. The effects of toxic leadership are damaging to organizations and employees. Watkins and Walker (2021) stated that the impacts of toxic leadership corrupt organizational environments with a direct impact on employees, such as a reduction in performance, stifled creativity, reduction in morale and mood, and negative impacts on health and wellness. When under the rule of a toxic leader, employees will adopt coping strategies ranging from speaking up to not recognizing the situation or taking it in stride, stepping up to performance expectations, or simply surviving as best they can.

Shifting to the fire service perspective, all facets of leadership style types, good, bad, abusive, or destructive, and toxic, are present in the firehouse and at management levels across the department. Reviewing the demographic makeup of a male-dominated career field to understand further how toxic leadership gains a strong foothold in the fire service is essential. Koepfel et al. (2022) stated that in 2018 female firefighters made up eight percent of the fire service. Matos et al. (2018) argued that a “win or die” culture bred by masculinity is overused, exaggerated, and taken to the extreme, that produces a counterproductive effect on organizations. The hypercompetitive systems are tied to negative outcomes such as decreased psychological safety, bullying and abuse, and harassment, which leads to burnout and high turnover rates.

In contrast, Marques-Quinteiro et al. (2022) stated that from a transformational perspective, a fire chief perceived as transformational would increase job performance, increase available resources, and decrease firefighter exhaustion and strain. Though success stories in the

fire service like the one listed above, toxic leadership is prevalent and spreads throughout the connective fabric of the fire service. Watkins and Walker (2021) used examples of toxic leadership that included degrading or ridiculing employees, inflicting psychological pain, promoting divisiveness, or corrupting the work environment with hypocrisy and narcissism, and lying, bullying, blaming others, or leaders using fear and coercion in the pursuit of unrealistic goals. Firefighter safety, work performance, and development are vital in any department. Saleem et al. (2021) stated that leaders play a significant role in workplace employee safety. Whereas positive and constructive leadership styles increase individual and organizational safety, harmful leadership styles (i.e., toxic) place undue pressure on workers and increase organizational toxicity, leading to lower employee safety and performance.

### **Synthesis of the Existing Literature**

Accountability is at the forefront of leadership; good leaders share information, model good behavior, practice collaboration, and nurture a productive leader-member exchange (Ivanov et al., 2021). In addition, accountability is linked to transformational leaders who use charisma to influence followers to increase individual and organizational safety; they motivate, inspire, stimulate, and raise both the follower and leader with mutual relationships and morality. From the fire service perspective, fire chiefs practicing transformational leadership will increase firefighter safety and performance (ElKordy, 2022; Márques-Quinteiro et al., 2022; Saleem et al., 2021).

The burden of leadership in or out of the fire service falls on the leader. Leaders must have a genuine concern for people, respect, and trust, a non-apathetic or indifferent approach, the ability to compromise and collaborate, and conflict management. Leaders balance the

equilibrium in their organizations through quality leader-member exchange and relationships. Leaders must face severe problems and provide or generate consensus and clarity to help employees realize job satisfaction (Hill et al., 2022; Northouse, 2019; Wellman et al., 2019). A leader in the fire service needs to remember that each firefighter's worldview is different, and perception, trust, and understanding of good fire officers varies, particularly with female firefighters, who are only a tiny percentage of the fire service (Koeppel et al., 2022; Tremaine, 2022).

Regardless of background and beginnings, the look toward great leadership exists. Great leaders demonstrate constructive leadership, demonstrating vulnerability, collaboration, civility, and creating a powerful sense of community. Moreover, to be a great leader, the possession of specific qualities such as authenticity, kindness, ownership, coaching and mentoring, sympathy and empathy, humor and optimism are necessary (Askew, 2022; Burns, 2017; Hill et al., 2022; Sarkus, 2022; Vardiashvili, 2022). Great leaders may come in the form of servant leaders, where the emphasis is placed on the employee and satisfying employee needs while building LMX, which builds the community around them (Sarkus, 2022). Great leadership might manifest itself in a transactional leader who focuses on mutual agreements and positive leadership behavior to influence followers to emulate. Finally, leadership could be transformational, where resources and opportunities are increased with goal setting and charisma to achieve elevated levels of success (ElKordy, 2022; Márques-Quinteiro et al., 2022; Young et al., 2021).

With the good, there is always leadership gone wrong, the bad. Bad leadership can be destructive through the intentional or learned misuse of quality leadership traits resulting in unethical and abusive traits to meet the leader's needs (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). For example, abusive leaders intimidate, manipulate, micromanage, are aggressive, demonstrate favoritism,

use coercion, and bullying (Burns, 2017; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Satiani & Satiani, 2022; Webster et al., 2016). For example, the bullying leader specifically targets employees and limits their ability to defend or sabotage an employee's work; the bully will use verbal abuse, manipulate employees, act narcissistic, threaten, humiliate employees, and act offensively through conduct and behavior (; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Matos et al., 2018; Onorato, 2013; Satiani & Satiani, 2022).

The culmination of declining leadership from effective → good → poor → toxic inflicts harassment on employees. Harassment can be physical, verbal, ostracizing, or non-protective, which leads to negative outcomes in the organization, decreased physical and psychological safety for employees, burnout, and high turnover. In addition, with leaders playing a critical role in the safety of subordinates, harmful styles of leadership, especially toxic ones, place undue pressure on employees, force performance to unacceptable levels, and increase the overall toxicity of the work center (W. A. Burns, 2017; Matos et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2021).

Moreover, these destructive leaders stand firmly at the bottom end of the leadership scale as the worst possible leader, often applying highly unethical decisions and practices while openly displaying the behaviors and characteristics of authoritarian, bullying, and abusive leaders openly and aggressively. Toxic leaders will combine destructive and abusive traits with meeting their needs while neglecting any form of care for employees in the organization. Toxic leaders will regularly shift blame to anyone but themselves, intentionally creating strife and stress among their employees. Toxic leaders will also demonstrate poor planning and communication skills. Toxic leaders thrive off dysfunction and will act abnormally good when their supervisors are around. Toxic leaders are poison, deceitful, and critically damaging to their employee's health and wellness, overall safety, development, and futures (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Ivanov et al.,

2021; Saleem et al., 2021; Satiani & Satiani, 2022; Watkins & Walker, 2021; Williams, 2019; Winn & Dykes, 2019).

### **Summary**

In the search to understand how toxic leadership in the fire service might be identified and characterized, a comprehensive survey of literature available on the general topics of great and good leadership characteristics was completed. The search yielded abundant scholarly resources concerning general leadership and authoritarian, transformational, transactional, servant, and accountability leadership styles. However, the survey and analysis of available literature also led to the discovery of the “dark side” of leadership with the dominating styles of destructive, abusive, bullying, and toxic leadership (all unethical).

In all leadership style literature reviewed, the level of leader-member exchange (LMX), psychological and physical safety, community safety, and organizational performance levels was first- and second-order effects of the leadership style, good or bad. The comprehensive literature (from a general perspective) will assist the next step of this study, where specific surveys and interviews of various firefighter age groups, career status, and agency size will provide valuable data. The data gathered from surveys and interviews will represent the qualifiable information needed to identify toxic leadership in the fire service.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter summarized the qualitative methodology used while conducting structured research on the topic of identifying toxic leadership in the fire service. This topic was selected due to the need to advance the relationship and understanding of toxic leadership within fire departments and the ability of firefighters to identify the characteristics and traits of toxic leaders accurately. An in-depth review of available literature built the foundation for this research project with beneficial and relevant material relating to multiple levels of toxic leadership. For this research, toxic leaders “were ones who use destructive, often intentional, behaviors to serve themselves and their agenda, causing excessive harm to their subordinates and other coworkers” (Chappelow et al., 2018, p. 13).

This chapter focused on five overarching topics: research design, population and sample size, instruments used, the research design, and ethical considerations. The purpose, strategy, and method to identify the qualities and firefighters’ understanding of leadership toxicity centered on qualifiable data collected and offered in a manner congruent with qualitative research data analysis and presentation. The role of the researcher was to propose a problem related to toxic leadership in the fire service and purposefully research the subject in a non-biased way to elicit genuine interviewee responses to support an accurate and replicable study.

This study experienced fire service leadership before and through the term ‘toxic’ used as a regular moniker for leaders that behaved in unethical, immoral, destructive, and abusive ways. The researcher used firsthand experiences across years in the fire service, from a firefighter to a fire chief, to reflectively keep notes during the research process, particularly while interviewing study participants. Additionally, the researcher utilized benchmarks in the research process to

evaluate if methods, data collection, analysis, and findings were contaminated by bias or were forthright and followed scholar-based qualitative techniques and design.

### **Research Design**

Three primary research methods exist, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. When using quantitative methods, it is common to use a hypothesis to introduce the reader to expected outcomes. Collecting empirical data in a quantitative method uses set parameters such as size, power, and precision to measure results accurately. Results are compared to the hypothesis and interpreted into study findings (APA, 2020). Qualitative research incorporates much less control of the research process and allows the study of multiple approaches such as grounded theory, ethnographic, phenomenological, narrative, and generic research. Levitt et al. (2018) described qualitative methods as beneficial to the psychological community due to the ability to use “subjectivity and experiences as legitimate data for analyses” (p. 27).

A mixed method approach is third, where the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods are combined to create better insight into the problem or question being studied. With the mixed approach, design can vary to suit the study, problem, or hypothesis; however, three are common. For example, Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that one design, concurrent quantitative and qualitative data collection/analysis, occur and are then merged to compare. Another design places quantitative data collection at the forefront, with qualitative data collection afterward, which allows qualitative results to explain the quantitative interpretation.

Of the three primary research methods (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed), qualitative was the best methodology for identifying toxic leadership in the fire service. Creswell and

Creswell (2018) stated that qualitative research is the most subjective form, allowing researchers to use face-to-face interaction, permitting a holistic perspective, focusing on the varying study participants' understanding of the problem. In addition, the participants for this research were randomly selected after a purposive sample pool of respondents was created to achieve the target population and sample size. For these reasons, the method chosen to study toxic leadership in the fire service was generic qualitative.

### **Population and Sample Size**

The recruitment strategy for this study consisted of premeditated factors to achieve a full and complex data stream from all ranks, ages, and positions within the fire service. This was necessary to generate confidence in collecting and interpreting participant responses regarding each firefighter's understanding of toxic leadership in the fire service. The fire agencies accessible included 11 local departments (two paid and nine volunteer agencies), two paid city departments within 100 miles, and Department of Defense fire departments through service branch connections. The interview participant pool consisted of career and volunteer firefighters who were locally accessible and non-local career firefighters available through digital platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams). Data-masked information of participant age, time in service, and position in the agency, shown in Appendix C, were grouped to capture variances in responses by each participant.

The recruitment process was initiated as an email request sent out to multiple fire chiefs to generate interest. Sampling consisted of a purposive method with the goal of randomized selection. Purposive sampling occurred through grouping respondents by agency position data so a minimum sample batch could be built for balanced representation of each agency position

grouping. After validating a purposive sample base was built, participant selection was achieved with a random number sequence generator. The random number sequence was used to select three participants from each position category to ensure stable data collection. The design process included a sample size of 10-15 participants with a recruitment effort to achieve a 25 percent random selection rate of female participants across all agency position groups. (Note: Intentional selection of female participants was not done.) The justification for n=15 was to ensure the study remained manageable yet provided enough qualitative data to safeguard the research project's credibility. Chitac (2022) would agree noting, in theory, the data variances gathered would gain empirical confidence to present findings on the problem or issue.

### **Instruments**

Specific instruments were needed to interview participants and record their responses to questions regarding toxic leadership in the fire service while ensuring the integrity of the data and the protection of participants. The instruments for this research study include a participant interview consent form provided by the National Fire Academy - Executive Fire Officer Program (Appendix B), data-masked demographics records (Appendices C and D), coded interview results (Appendices G and I), and participant interview question summary responses (Appendices F and H). All instruments were constructed to maintain anonymity for participants to ensure no attribution or retribution occurred after participating in the study.

Creating an interview questionnaire, Table 3, to deliver questions to the participants allowed addressing questions associated to the three overarching research questions on page 10 above. The need to balance presented questions to interviewees ensures consistency in data collection. In addition, it allows for equal depth of engagement to rationalize the study and allow

the researcher to apply and describe reflexivity (Levitt et al., 2018). Before soliciting participants and performing interviews, a field test of instruments occurred. Field testing instruments allow subject matter experts to review the instruments' reliability before interviews and data collection.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that field tests of instruments apply validity to instruments and allow for a consistency check before use with research participants. The field testers selected in this research were three sitting fire chiefs who had a minimum of 20 years in the fire service, had completed the Executive Fire Officer Program or held a master's degree, and held credentials from the Center for Public Safety Excellence as a Chief Fire Officer. The three qualified field testers provided input as a panel of experts. The benefit of requiring field testers to hold a minimum agency position, have tenure, and educational and credential requirements was to ensure that acceptable breadth and depth of fire service experience was applied during the critique of instruments used for research.

All three field testers reviewed the instruments and agreed they supported data collection for this generic qualitative research project. The use of probing to dig deeper into responses was applied to each participant during the interview to maintain consistency. In addition, participants received follow-up questions to probe deeper into their responses. All post interview clarification needed was conducted with participants in a follow-up interview to keep all respondent data balanced.

**Table 3***Research Interview Questionnaire*

---

***General (G) demographic questions***

---

What is your position within the department?

Are you paid or volunteer?

What is your age?

What generation group are you?

What is your gender?

---

***Questions for Research Question One, characteristics and behaviors of toxic leaders.***

---

How do you describe a toxic leader?

What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?

How many leaders that you have worked for would qualify as toxic?

---

***Questions for Research Question Two, differentiate the effectiveness of toxic leaders.***

---

How are effective leaders different from toxic leaders?

Using examples, how would you describe the effectiveness of toxic leaders?

Describe the outcomes of leadership compared to a toxic leader?

---

***Questions for Research Question Three, generational perspectives, and toxic leaders.***

---

What are the defining factors between accountability necessary in the fire service and toxic leadership?

How do different generations view and perceive toxic leadership differently?

---

***Questions for general research questioning, frequency of toxic leaders.***

---

How many times have you witnessed toxic leadership in the last month?

How often have you heard peers talk about toxic leadership in the last month?

### Research Process

This study was designed, constructed, and executed to allow future replicability. The research process began with understanding the problem of, How do firefighters identify the characteristics of toxic leadership in the fire service. Once the foundation of the study was placed (i.e., problem, literature review, population and sample size, instrument creation), recruitment and selection began. An email request (Appendix A), which did not contain the research study's topic, for participants was sent to the Air Force Fire Chief for distribution to other Department of Defense fire protection chiefs (non-local). Additionally, the email was sent to agency fire chiefs within 100 miles (local) to solicit volunteers.

Respondents expressing a desire to participate in the study were recorded (in a document only available to the researcher) according to agency affiliation and position within the agency. If agency affiliation or position was unclear, a clarification email was sent to the respondent for clarification. Respondents were listed alphabetically by *last name, first name* and assigned a numerical value of 1-n; a "*sample only*" initial sorting list is shown in Table 4, the actual list with personally identifiable information will not be published. To ensure anonymity, non-attribution, and non-retribution for interview participants, a data-masked 1-n list used in this study for respondent selection appears in Appendix D.

The selection of 15 participants was based on a goal-based balance of three per agency position using a number sequence number list. To maintain a randomized participant selection protocol as possible, a number sequence generator from [www.random.org](http://www.random.org) generated a sequence list of applicants based on total respondents 1-n. Appendix E contains the random number sequence list used in the study. The first three sequence numbers to appear within each agency position group were chosen as primary interviewees, with the following three sequence numbers

appearing in each position group selected as alternates. An email notification was sent verifying that they still wished to contribute to the research. Finally, three alternates from each agency position grouping were selected and notified if a primary participant could not continue with the study.

**Table 4**

*SAMPLE: Respondent Initial Sorting List*

<b>Alphabetic Last, First Name</b>	<b>1-n</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>NL</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>AF</b>	<b>MC</b>	<b>FF</b>	<b>D/O</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>SFO</b>	<b>CFO</b>
Xxxx Xxxxx	1					x				x		
Xxxx Xxxxx	2				x							x
Xxxx Xxxxx	3				x						x	

**Key:**

- A - Army
- N - Navy
- AF - Air Force
- MC - Marine Corps
- L - Local / NL - Non-Local
- FF - Firefighter
- D/O - Driver/Operator
- CO - Company Officer
- SFO - Senior Fire Officer
- CFO - Chief Fire Officer

Preliminary correspondence with selected participants was accomplished through email. Additional correspondence included validation of intent to participate in a primary capacity or as an alternate participant and a consent form with a generalized overview of an unstructured interview methodology during a qualitative interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research study’s topic, *Identifying Toxic Leadership in the Fire Service*, was provided at the beginning of the virtual interview, not before the interview to maintain response integrity. Each local and non-local participant provided a completed consent agreement before the interview and was interviewed through Microsoft Teams to maintain interview consistency. In addition, the research processes complied with participants who requested not to be videoed but still wished to participate; each interview was recorded.

Transcription technology created a written form of each interview that was saved as a research document for reference during the findings phase of the study. During the review of each interview, data was hand-coded and collated as responses into tables, figures, or appendices to capture standard and recurrent responses, emergent themes, and responses by age, tenure, and position grouping. Additionally, responses and themes were cataloged according to the three research question groups. All data recording was done with the intent of anonymity and saved according to the participant's 1-n identifier. The anticipated saturation point occurred when the responses of all participants were reflective of each other's, and new information was not generated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The topic of toxic leadership, particularly when experienced in the past or present, is known to create mental trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Einarsen et al., 2009; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Tepper, 2007). Furthermore, psychological safety was a focus of the project, which was employed during the interviews. If the interviewer noticed significant vocal or physical distress, the interview was paused, and the participant was provided an opportunity to stop; additionally, each participant was instructed that completion of the interview was not mandatory and that they may stop the interview at any point if the participant felt too emotionally invested. To ensure this research project causes no further or future harm and to meet all ethical criteria expected in studies of a federally funded study, all personally identifying information was scrubbed to maintain the non-attribution and non-retribution intent of the project.

General demographic questions were built to maintain anonymity and consisted of age, tenure, agency position, gender, and career status. This allowed the collection of quality data without attribution to any individual. Furthermore, during the interview, participants masked any examples by concealing names, dates, locations, and agency information. Finally, each participant was asked to agree not to divulge anything about the study until it was published. Participants were not permitted access to the personally identifiable information of others in the study.

One individual managed all research information throughout the entire process of the study. All information and results were retained with appropriate data masking necessary to maintain participant confidentiality. Firsthand experiences with toxic leadership enhanced notetaking during interviews and to probe deeper into participant responses. The research interview processes were approached with the intent to not apply bias to responses during the data coding or any other portions of this research project. All findings were validated through the peer review process in addition to the codification of literature and participant-provided information.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the research design from a general qualitative perspective and why the focused on and utilized this method to approach the central research questions. The population pool for this research consisted of local fire departments and a substantial pool of non-local fire departments, both accessible through fire chiefs and email. Four research instruments were identified for this study: a consent form, data masked demographics record, an interview questionnaire, and coded interview results. The next step identified was the research

process which consisted of how the potential pool of applicants would generate the target sample pool of participants. Lastly, ethical considerations related to this study were addressed, specifically confidentiality and mandatory reporting requirements.

The next chapter consists of study results, beginning with an overview of participant demographics. Next, chapter four will expose the results found during the interview and research process. This will include common or recurrent responses, themes, and statistical information captured during the coding process. Most importantly, the chapter four will be presented as raw, uninterpreted data; chapter five will tie information from chapter four to the study's conclusion and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS

### Introduction – Demographics of the Participants

This study consisted of open advertisement of participants through agency head and peer-to-peer distribution internal and external to the researcher's agency. Fifty-two respondents (Table 5) expressed interest in participating and were tabulated on a master demographics roster (Appendix D). Position on the roster and 1-n listing priority was calculated based on initial email response date and time. Fifteen study participants were selected using a random sequence generator (Appendix E) where three participants from five agency position groupings, which were firefighter (FF), driver/operator (D/O), company officer (CO), senior fire officer (SFO), and chief fire officer (CFO).

**Table 5**

*Respondent Totals*

<b>Respondents:</b>	<b>FF</b>	<b>D/O</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>SFO</b>	<b>CFO</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Position	8	4	10	17	13	52
United States Army				1	1	2
United States Navy	1			4	1	6
United States Air Force	7	4	9	11	11	42
United States Marine Corps			1	1		2
Totals	8	4	10	17	13	52

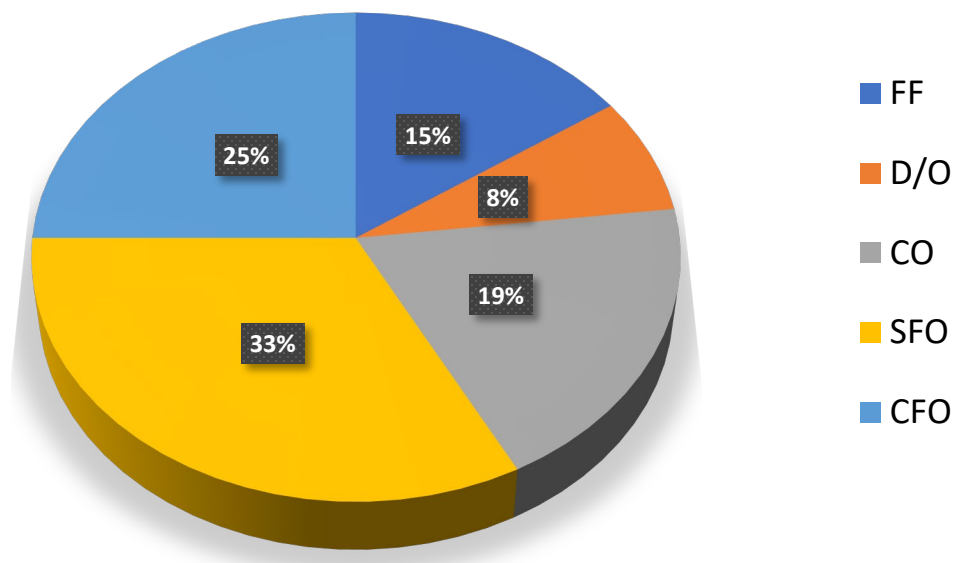
To delineate the top two groups deputy and fire chiefs were identified as CFOs and battalion and assistant chiefs were identified as SFOs. Additionally, as seen in Figure 1 of all 52 respondents, eight (15%) held the position of firefighter, 4 of 52 (8%) were driver/operators, 10 of 52 (19%) were company officers, 17 of 52 (33%) were senior fire officers, and 13 of 52 (25%) held the position of a chief fire officer. Based on service affiliation the Air Force respondents

were greatest at 42 of 52, followed by the Navy at 6 of 52, then Army and Marines equally at 2 of 52 each (Figure 2). All respondents were career (i.e., paid) firefighters.

### Figure 1

*Respondents by Position*

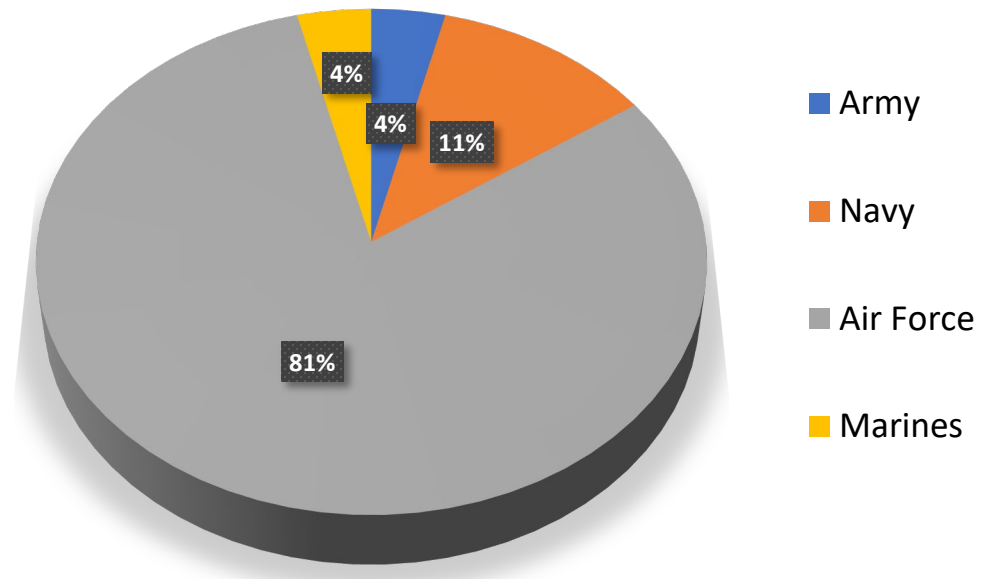
#### All Respondents By Position



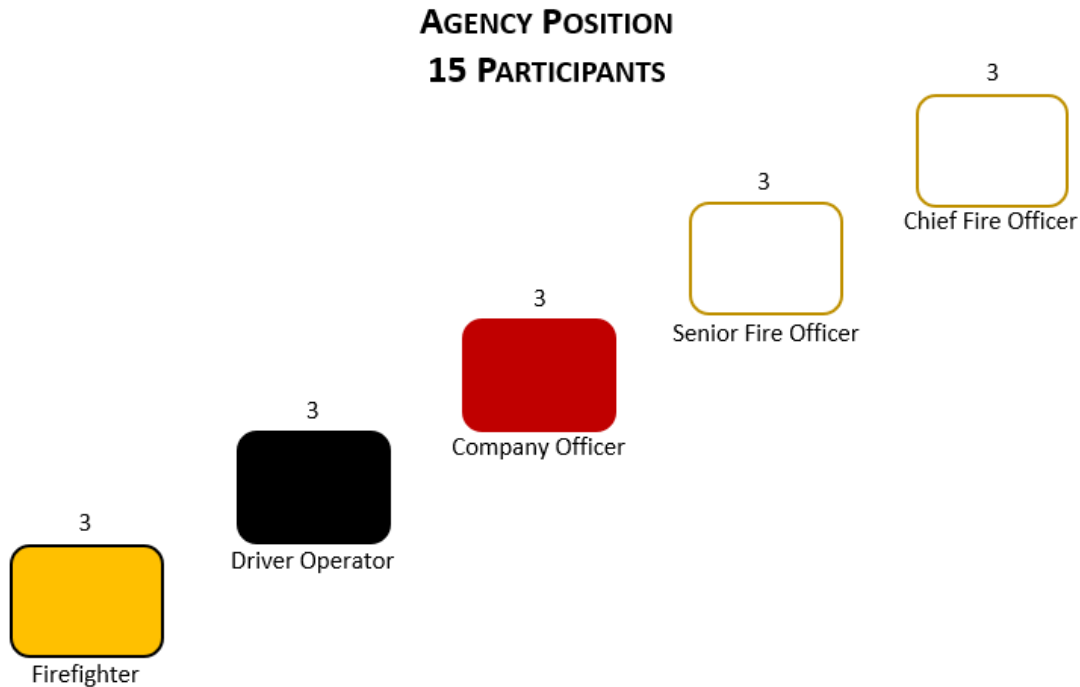
**Research notes:** Requests for respondents were sent to paid and volunteer fire departments within a 100-mile radius. However, zero responses were received from state and local fire agencies. All respondents were a sub-agency of Department of Defense Fire Protection.

**Figure 2**

Respondents by Service Affiliation

**All Respondents By Service Affiliation**

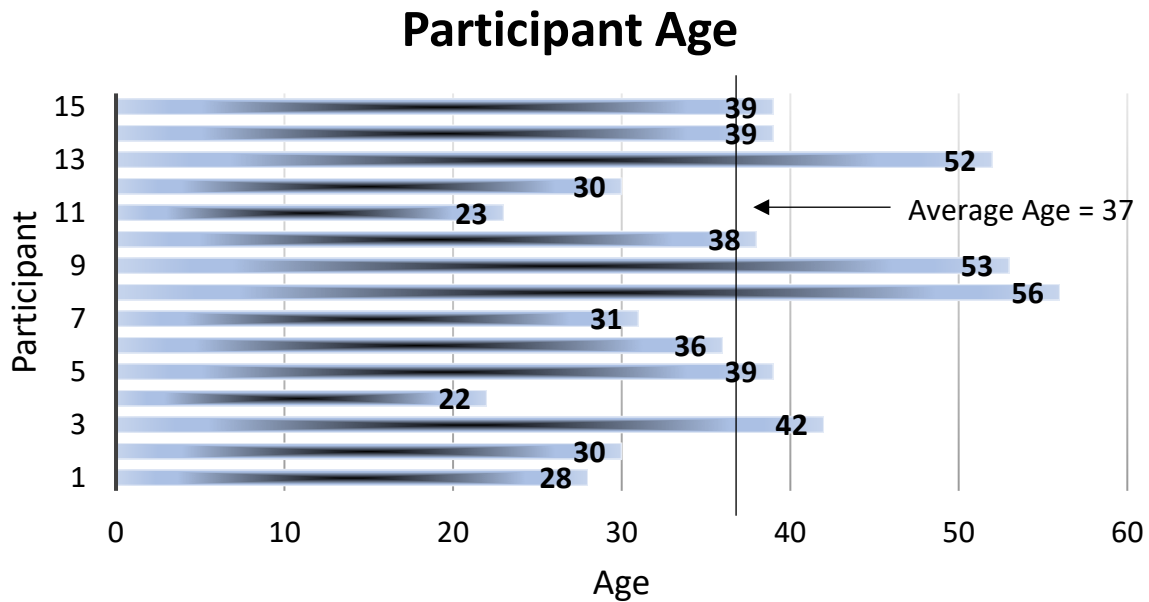
Those respondents selected as primary were re-organized into an alphabetical list, based on last name, and re-identified as *Participants 1-15*. An alternate participant list was created using the same process used for the primary participant list. As planned, three participants from five agency position groups (i.e., Firefighter, Driver Operator, Company Fire Officer, Senior Fire Officer, and Chief Fire Officer) as seen in Figure 3 were interviewed.

**Figure 3***Participants by Agency Position Group*

Of all 52 respondents, three (5%) were female. Of the selected participants, 14 were male (93%) and one participant was female (7%). The randomized selection method of participants from all respondents did not yield the recruitment goal of 25 percent female participants. The male to female participant percentages did closely reflect a 2020 study of the fire service where female firefighters made up eight percent of employees (Fahy et al., 2022). All participants were career fire service employees at full time paid fire departments. The 15 participants ranged in age from 22 years-old to 56 years-old, with an average age of 37 as seen in Figure 4. Five participants were less than 30-years-old, six participants were between 31-40-years-old, one participant was between 41-50-years-old, and three were older than 51 years-old. Participant generation groups seen in Figure 5 are based on age and were Generation X (3-total), Millennial (11-total), and Generation Z (1-total).

**Figure 4**

*Participants by Age*



The 15 participants included in this study were evaluated based on their responses to 10 standard interview questions through a generic qualitative process. Eight of the interview questions were open-ended and tied to three research questions (RQ):

RQ 1 - How accurately are firefighters able to identify the characteristics of toxic leadership

RQ 2 - How do firefighters differentiate the effectiveness of those not demonstrating toxic leadership?

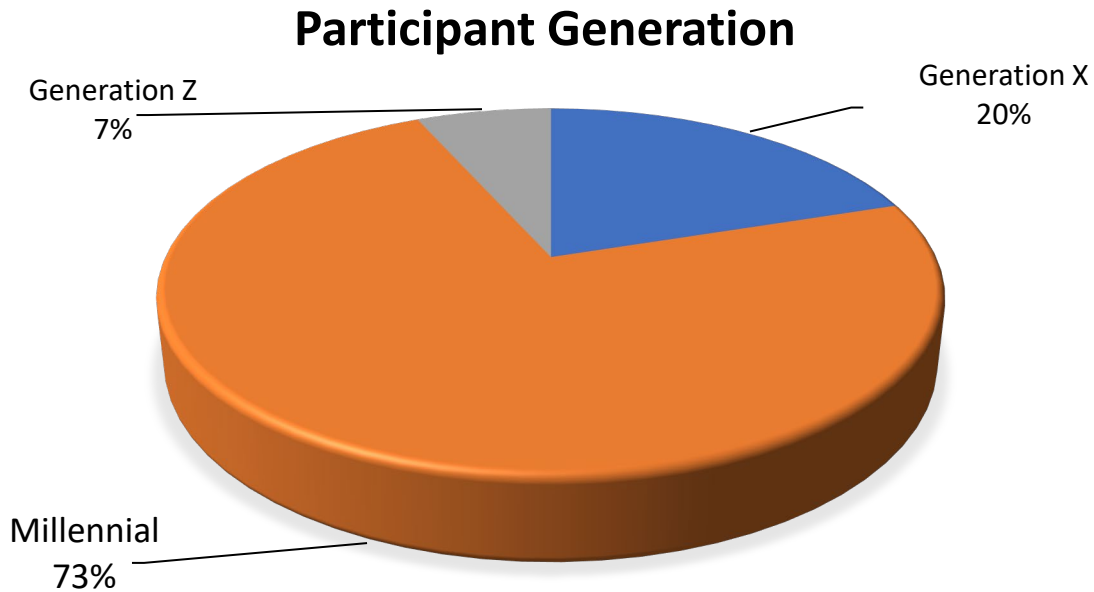
RQ 3 - Do generational perspectives or worldviews affect an individual’s interpretation of toxic leadership?

Three of 10 questions measured frequency of exposure to toxic leaders based on the participant’s understanding of the topic. Interview question (IQ) #1 asked the total number of toxic leaders the participant worked for in their fire service career. IQ #9 asked the total number of toxic leaders

the participant had encountered in the past 30-day period. IQ #10 asked the total number of toxic leaders they had been told about in the last 30-day period.

**Figure 5**

*Participants by Generation Group*



### **Research Results**

Participant interviews were recorded using Microsoft (MS) Teams, which produced a transcript of the interview. Interview notes were taken manually and matched to the MS Teams transcript to verify participant responses. Research collected during the study was coded and grouped by similarities and differences in participant responses for each question. Themes emerged for each interview question in the data and are represented by overarching research question, interview question, theme title, number of participants emerging within that theme, and summary of each participant's response. Responses were grouped and ranged from 93% to 13% of participants providing answers for that grouping. The appendices contain portions of

summarized responses, by participant, for each theme grouped under interview and research questions. Presentation of themes will be organized as acronym for the research question (RQ) and interview question (IQ) (e.g., RQ1/IQ1 for research question one, interview question one).

Themes are presented in descending percentile order with toxic leaders represented as *TL*.

### **RQ1/IQ1:**

**Interview Question One: *How do you describe a toxic leader?*** Four main themes emerged from participant descriptions of a *TL*. These themes were based on similarities in responses at 30% or greater and were: (a) Inadequacies in leadership ability; (b) illegal, immoral, and unethical behavior; (c) actions or behavior that had negative effects on employees; and (d) behavior that was selfish or for themselves. Two characteristic groupings fell below the 30% response rate, which were extreme rigidity or inflexible behavior and leaders that have poor to no communication skills.

#### Summary of results:

Theme one - *Inadequacies in leadership ability*. 13 of 15 participants (93%) described toxic leaders as having significant inadequacies in their leadership ability. Sample responses were Participants #3 and #5 similarly referenced a *TL*'s inability to understand people, refusal to see different perspectives, particularly that of the employee. Additionally, that *TLs* lacked ability to generate buy-in or control emotions. Both agreed that they have witnessed managers that don't understand the difference between managing and leading and cannot understand or see their personal faults.

Participants #9 and #13 felt *TLs* were not impactful to the organization and do not allow firefighters to be heard or valued. Expanding on this theme, Participant #13 stated, "A *TL* placed little value on feelings, hopes, wishes, and wants, placing the mission above subordinates."

These two participants equally thought a *TL* was in positions for the wrong reasons, often using archaic generational methods of leading and managing.

Theme two - *Illegal, immoral, and unethical*. Seven of 15 participants (47%) identified that *TLs* demonstrated illegal, immoral, and unethical behavior. Participant #2 directly referenced “Immoral, unethical, or illegal actions” when defining toxic leaders, while Participant #6 felt constant belittling, controlling situations, or blatantly disrespecting employees and not respecting others’ positions or backgrounds. Participants #7 and #8 were aligned in their description of a *TL* fostering a hostile work environment that negatively impacts morale through decisions and actions. They added that these leaders are not good people, they are petty, unfair, cliquish, and only help employees they like to succeed.

Theme three - *Negative effects on employees*. Seven of 15 participants (47%) identified that a *TL*’s decisions and actions had negative impact on employees. Participant #7 summarized *TL* behavior as, “Sucks the life out of new firefighters and derails other employees” with Participant #8 noting unequal treatment of employees or having favorites and treating employees unfairly. Participants #10 described withholding information on current items, which creates anxiety and pressure on employees as an indication of *TLs*. Participant #15 claimed that a *TL* will always take credit for accomplishments of employees.

Theme four - *Selfish, or for themselves*. Five of 15 participants (33%) stated that *TLs* demonstrated selfish or a “for themselves” attitude. Unanimously, Participants #7, #11, and #14 identified *TLs* as not putting subordinates first, always out for themselves versus people around them, driven by self-interests and wants, and devoid of selfless behavior and actions. Participant #8 expanded on this theme with “Uses [things] to own advantage but not for others. In addition to four themes, interview question one (i.e., participant description of a toxic leader)

responses also described *TLs* as unwilling to change (e.g., rigid and unbending or not open to new ideas or methods), having a ‘do as I say — not as I do’ or ‘this is how we do it because this is how we always did it’ mentality, regardless of their education and experience. Finally, a *TL* believes they are correct no matter the time, place, or instance with a pronounced distaste for change.

### **RQ1/IQ2:**

**Interview Question Two: *What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?***

#### Summary of results:

All participants answered with responses ranging between three to 10 discernable characteristics of *TLs*. Two methods were used to qualify responses to ensure valid data. Each data coding method presents qualification of recorded responses against material presented earlier in this research paper, which (a) Table 1 content, and (b) Table 2 content. See Appendix F for a summary of participant responses.

*Data Coding Method One.* The first qualification method utilized Table 1, *12 Universal Truths of a Good Leader*, to match participant responses against the truths from a characteristic standpoint that is shown in Table 6. Participants match rate ranged between 17% and 92%. The average characteristic identification was six of the 12 truths, which represents an average match percentage rate of 51%. This method demonstrated a higher understanding of *TL* and the characteristics, traits, and behaviors associated.

**Table 6***Participant Response Correlation to 12 Universal Truths of a Good Leader*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Response Match</b>	<b>Percent Match</b>
1	5	42%
2	8	67%
3	6	50%
4	3	25%
5	8	67%
6	6	50%
7	5	42%
8	2	17%
9	7	58%
10	7	58%
11	7	58%
12	7	58%
13	6	50%
14	3	25%
15	11	92%

*Data Coding Method Two.* The second qualification method used Table 2, *14 Leadership Qualities*. Like method one, participant responses were calculated against the 14 qualities. Participant match rate ranged between 21% and 79% (Table 7), with an average match rate of 50%. Utilizing this method participants matched seven of the 14 qualities. This method returned data qualification akin to method one.

**Table 7***Participant Response Correlation to 14 Leadership Qualities*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Response Match</b>	<b>Percent Match</b>
1	9	64%
2	10	71%
3	7	50%
4	3	21%
5	8	57%
6	7	50%
7	7	50%
8	3	21%
9	7	50%
10	7	50%
11	7	50%
12	8	57%
13	7	50%
14	4	29%
15	11	79%

**RQ1/IQ3:**

**Interview Question Three: *How many leaders that you have worked for would qualify as toxic over your entire career?***

Summary of results:

Participants reported having between zero to nine *TLs*, with an average of four *TLs*

(Figure 6). The breakdown of exposure to *TLs* over their career was:

- One participant (#1) experienced nine *TLs*
- One participant (#8) experienced eight *TLs*
- Three participants (#6, #12, #15) experienced seven *TLs*
- One participant (#10) experienced five *TLs*

- One participant (#3) experienced three TLs
- Four participants (#5, #7, #9, #14) experienced two TLs
- Two participants (#2, #13) experienced one TL
- Two participants (#4, #11) had experienced no TLs

**Figure 6**

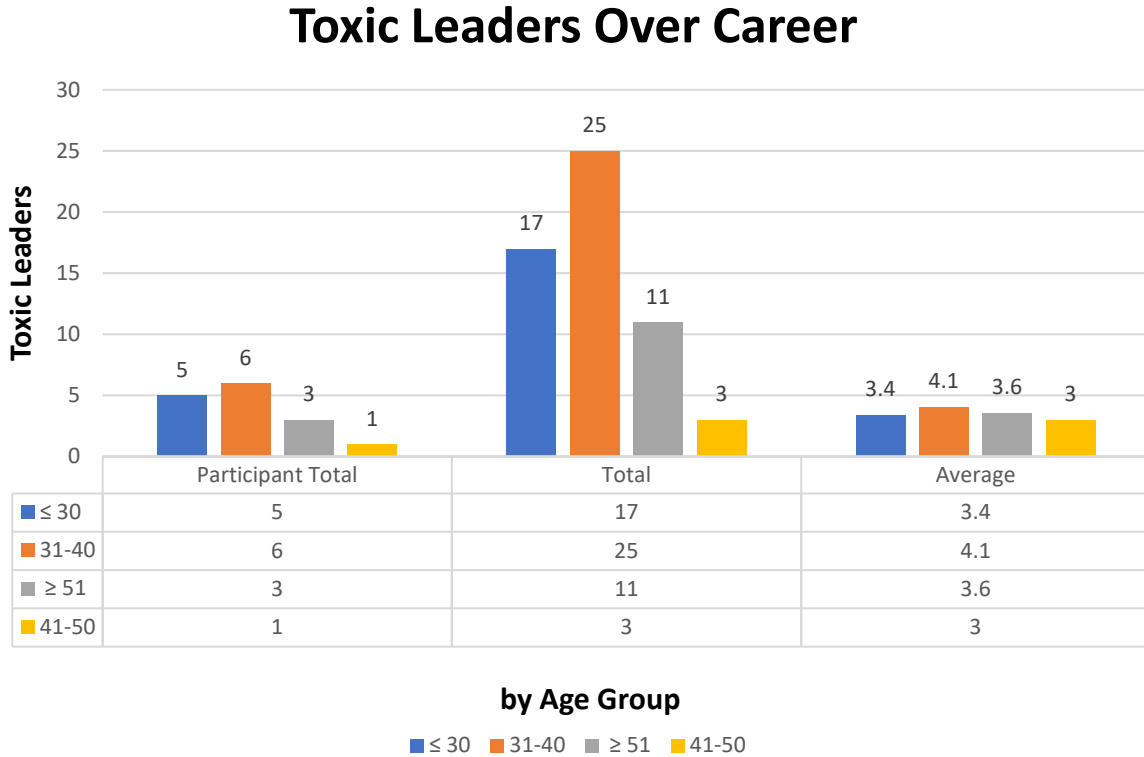
*Toxic Leaders Experienced over Career*



The largest age group, 31–40-year-olds (Millennials), were represented by six participants and collectively had experienced the most TLs (25 total) with an average of four (4.1 actual). TLs by age groups are shown in Figure 7. The ≤ 30-year-old group, also Millennial but contains Generation Z, was comprised of 5 participants with a total TL experience of 17 and an average experience of three (3.4 actual). Five participants ≥ 51 years-old had experienced 11 TLs collectively with an average of four (3.6 actual) amongst them. The 41–50-year-old group was represented by one participant, who had experienced three toxic leaders over their career.

**Figure 7**

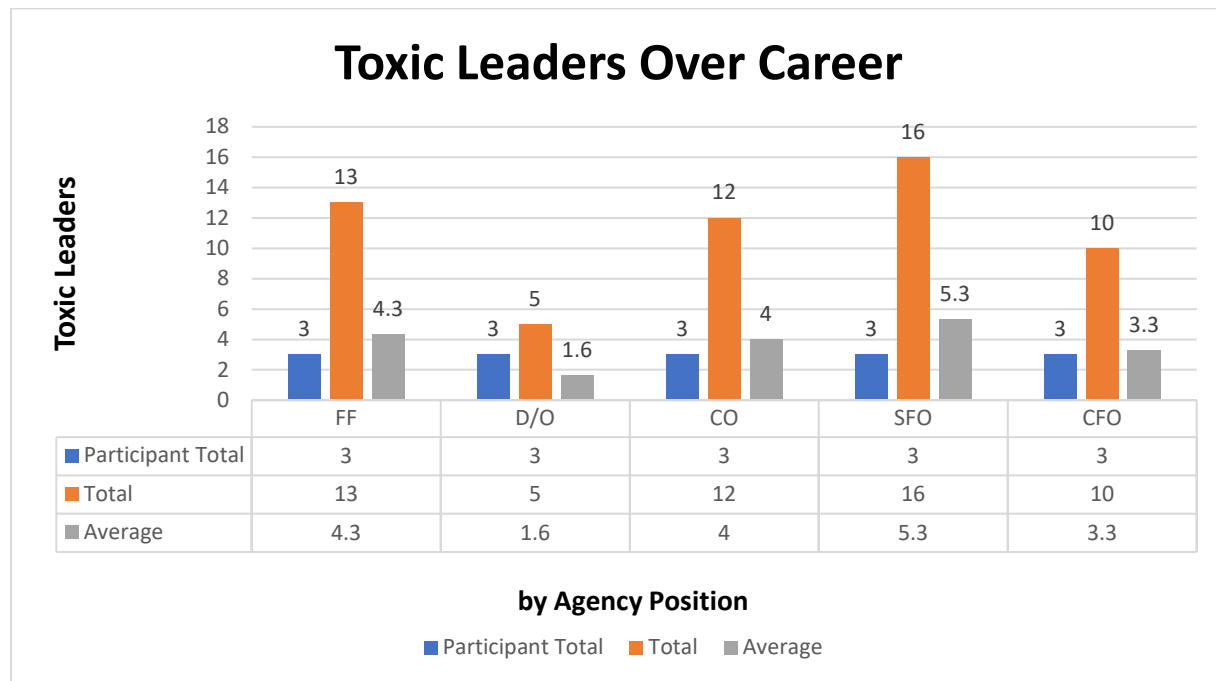
*Toxic Leaders Experienced Over Career by Age Group*



Using a third data model, total *TLs* experience over participants’ careers was captured based off agency position (i.e., three participants per position group) and is represented in Figure 8. From most to least order, senior fire officers (SFO) experienced the most *TLs* in their careers with a combined total of 16 and an average of five (5.3 actual). Following SFOs, firefighters (FF) experienced a total of 12 *TLs* with an average of 4 (4.3 actual). The next two agency position groups were company officers (CO) and chief fire officers (CFO) with a total *TL* exposure per group of 12 and 10, respectively. The average for COs was four and the average for CFOs was three (3.3 actual). Driver/Operators (D/O) had the least experience with *TLs*, only having experienced five collectively, making their position group average two (1.6 actual).

**Figure 8**

*Toxic Leaders Experienced Over Career by Agency Position*



**RQ2/IQ4:**

**Interview Question Four: *How are effective leaders different from toxic leaders?***

Summary of results:

Participants were asked to differentiate what they felt were effective leaders (*EL*) and *TLs*. All 15 participants provided a response, which was then dissected into individual components. A total of 70 individual sub-divided components (i.e., statements) were grouped into six emerging themes. Six themes that emerged were: (a) *ELs* are extroverted and display emotional intelligence; (b) *ELs* are charismatic, inspirational, and helpful; (c) *ELs* are great communicators; (d) *ELs* are humble and sincere; (e) *ELs* are accountable, fair, balanced, and efficient; and (f) *ELs* are action and goal focused, results driven, and have priorities and drive.

Table 8 contains the six emerging themes along with participant response count. Column one identifies the theme. Column two reflects the number of participants who had responses

within each theme. Column three displays how many sub-divided individual comments or statements, in total, were associated with the theme. A complete list of response grouped by theme for RQ2/IQ4 is in Appendix G.

**Table 8**

*Emerging Themes Differentiating Effective and Toxic Leaders*

<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Participants Responding for Theme</b>	<b>Total Participant Response Count</b>
<i>ELs are Extroverted and Display Emotional Intelligence.</i>	6	10
<i>ELs are Charismatic, Inspirational, and Helpful.</i>	9	20
<i>ELs are Great Communicators.</i>	5	10
<i>ELs are Humble and Sincere.</i>	10	14
<i>ELs are Accountable, Fair, Balanced, and Efficient.</i>	9	10
<i>ELs are Action and Goal Focused, Results Driven, and Have Priorities and Drive.</i>	3	6

**RQ2/IQ5:**

**Interview Question Five:** *Using examples, how would you describe the effectiveness of toxic leaders?*

Summary of results:

Participants used numerous examples from across their careers to respond to question five. The general consensus from participants was that *TLs* are capable of effectiveness; however, it cannot be sustained and will lead to organization failure. Two themes emerged during this question, which were: (a) *TLs* have the ability to be effective but at the cost of the

people and organization, and (b) Employees of *TLs* identify toxic leadership faster and more completely than the *TLs* superiors or peers. See Appendix H for a summary of participant responses.

Participant #1 stated, “*TLs* can be effective, but they cannot be effective by intention. *TLs* can be effective in certain situations, but all in all they are not effective.” Participant #5 agreed adding, “*TLs* may be effective within their span of control to keep their plan moving forward. Their scope of power is small.” Participant #7 had a slightly different response noting, “As a leader, when you are asked to get something done, you delegate it, and if you’re a *TL*, subordinates won’t go the extra bit. A *TL* won’t command that type of respect.” Participant #8 described that under *TL* minimum requirements are normally met; however, *TLs* breed a “bare minimum club” environment where employees will only accomplish what they need to for self-preservation and to retain their job.

Not all participants felt that *TLs* were incapable of effectiveness. Participant #9 recognized,

If you look at *TLs* they tend to look and think old school. The sternness and discipline can be more effective vs newer generation leaders. Some of the older non-personal leaders weren’t exactly toxic. The term “toxic” can be interpreted differently depending on who is looking at it. There can be solid traits associated with toxic leaders.

Participant #13 had similar thoughts stating, “You can be an effective leader and still be toxic. Thinking back to “Xxxxxx,” I don’t think the department went in reverse; people may not have liked him, but he for sure made the department move forward.” In similar thought, Participant #15 stated, “*TLs* have a dictatorship, there is time and place to be directive (e.g., life safety). A *TL* knows how to be very authoritative and get people to work only because of rank.”

The participants that also acknowledged the base effectiveness of *TLs* described the impact on individuals and organization that *TLs* have utilizing *TL* characteristics, traits, and behaviors. Participant #2 stated, “The lack of accountability erodes the agency,” then described that,

*TLs* are people to learn what not to do and do have effectiveness in a sense, but they are ineffective because their followers recreate toxicity through new toxic leaders. Some *TLs* are great at their job and effective but are [crappy] people.

Participant #3 described the impact of a *TL* on their organization by stating, “A prior *TL* with a lot of experience was able to upgrade positions. It was good for the agency, but he used it to leverage his position and caused a lot of disruption to the organization.” The participant also described the how the *TL* left the organization high and dry. Even though the leader had knowledge, skill, and competency, the toxic actions acted like a tornado on the fire department.

Leaders who meet the criteria of *TL* can create considerable damage on the organization, as Participant #4 stated, “If a *TL* is at the top, it starts to trickle down into the rest of the leadership and eventually most of the leadership seems toxic. Everybody is at each other’s throats, bickering and fighting about small stuff.” Participant #6 would agree, adding, “*TLs* crush people’s soul, motivation, and drive for those under them. You’re not able to breath and gasp for air. When you have people who suffer under that type of leader, performance is degraded because of the unbearable weight.” Participant #14 gave the example of working for a *TL* and becoming nauseous every time they came to work. Participant #10’s response summarized, identified how even though *TLs* have effectiveness, in the long term, they would fail and the organization would fail.

Though participant responses varied slightly, overall, the same themes were presented. First, that *TLs* can be effective but at a cost. Second is that employees of *TLs* identify *TL* faster and more completely than the *TLs* superiors or peers. One participant had a very complete response and stated,

A *TL* is not effective; subjectively, no, they cannot be effective. Objectively, a *TL* can be effective. If something is moving forward it is “effective.” However, the effectiveness comes at the cost of others (self-gaining). Their style isn’t about how to make it better for the team, it’s “me.” A *TL*’s effectiveness will never last, it will dwindle and diminish. *TLs* might be seen from the outside or from upward as an *EL*, however the bottom sees the truth. Those allowing the *TLs* to be in their position will not see the truth for a long time. (Participant #12)

#### **RQ2/IQ6:**

**Interview Question Six: *Describe the outcomes of leadership compared to a toxic leader?***

#### Summary of results:

Participant responses were captured and presented individually. As an example, Participant #1 felt that *EL* outcomes included a willingness to complete tasks, generating results closer to the desired outcome, and a leader’s view that employees want to work. The same participant felt that *TL* outcomes were forced completion of work tasks, obtaining results that were not close to the desired outcome or intent, and a leader’s view that employees only will perform the minimal amount of work needed. Appendix I contains all *EL* and *TL* outcomes identified by each participant as coded results for RQ2/IQ6.

In comparison of outcomes between *ELs* and *TLs*, participant responses fell in to four themed groupings: (a) Environmental outcomes; (b) employee and individual outcomes; (c) agency, team, task outcomes; and (d) leadership outcomes.

### **RQ3/IQ7:**

**Interview Question Seven: *What are the defining factors between accountability necessary in the fire service and toxic leadership?***

#### Summary of results:

The results of this question are grouped by agency position. Five position groups contained three participants each. The groups were firefighter (FF), driver/operator (D/O), company officer (CO), senior fire officer (SFO), and chief fire officer (CFO). The results of all responses were condensed into the *10 Qualities of Accountable Leaders* as shown in Table 9 and the *10 Toxic Leader Deficiencies in Accountability* shown in Table 10.

Participants #4, #5, and #14 were interviewed as the FF group and identified that accountability meant self-accountability and ownership, individual and program accountability, understanding employees are fallible (i.e., make mistakes), and honesty and integrity. Conversely, the same participants identified that *TLs* show lack of accountability through deflection, deception, or [gaslighting], poor housekeeping and unmanaged programs, obvious self-interest while not accepting feedback, perpetuation of destructive behavior, and lack of equal treatment. The D/O group was made up of Participants #1, #10, #11, and added to the differentiation of accountability versus toxicity. The D/O participants stated that toxicity in leaders can be identified by someone who allows loss of accountability over the years, exerts excessive pressure on subordinates, a leader that lacks personal accountability, and blames others. Accountability to the D/O participants was a leader that understands they are responsible

for lives, a leader that always makes themselves available to their employees, and someone who has high levels of integrity and personal accountability.

**Table 9**

*10 Qualities of Accountable Leaders*

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**10 Qualities**

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Consistent & Fair	Sets Example & Exceeds Standards
Direct-Line & Program Accountability	Attentive Supervisor & Positive Use of Position
Holds Self-Accountability	Delivers Good & Bad Criticism
Fosters & Exercises Trust	Sound Decision-Maker & Communicator
Allows Reasonable Failure & Learning	Empathetic & Flexible Leader

---

Company officers (Participants #3, #7, and #12) demonstrated increased understanding of accountability versus toxicity with collective agreement that accountability is shown through maintaining two-way trust-based accountability, allowing people to fail and learn, applying consistent accountability, and giving both good and bad criticism. Toxicity to CO participants meant actions that create loss of trust, micromanagement, a leader that just does the job themselves, consistent negative feedback, a leader that intrudes into employees’ personal lives, and freely allows external entities to control employees. In an increasing manner SFO interviewees (Participants #2, #6, and #15) identified accountability as necessary to agency and individual success, consistently and fairly applying accountability, effective verbal/non-verbal behavior, leaders that explain the “why,” leaders who exceed standards and apply core values, leading with trust and positive use of rank or position, leaders who show empathy and flexibility, and leaders to take the time to understand the issues.

**Table 10***10 Toxic Leader Deficiencies in Accountability*


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<b>10 Deficiencies</b>	
Decline of Accountability Over Years	Inattentive Leadership & Self-Interested
Accountability by Favoritism	Micromanagement & Disconnection
Does not Meet Expectations	Dictatorship & Forcing Blame on Others
Deflects, Deceives, & Gaslights	Emotionally Unintelligent
Perpetuates Destructive Behavior	Lacks Soft Skills & Empathy

---

SFOs assign a toxic label to leaders who apply accountability but only to their non-favorite employees or allow toxic followers to drive accountability actions. Additionally, SFO participants identified leaders who are not connective or have inattentive behavior, to include those not meeting expectations of their position, as toxic. Moreover, Participants #2, #6, and #15 felt toxic accountability include the lack of personal accountability, not allowing failures to build up the employee, leaders who have zero latitude for rule breaking (e.g., adjusting the daily schedule for emergent events), those leaders who abuse or mistreat employees, and who go to extremes to save their own reputation.

Participants #8, #9, and #13 rounded out the final group, CFOs, whose comprehension of accountability and toxicity was complex. The participants felt accountability included hiring the right people for the right jobs, providing regular and value-added feedback, accepting your role and responsibility as a leader, ensuring your firefighters received guidance, training, and coaching. Additionally, accountability from a CFO's perspective included sound fact-based decision-making, understanding both the mission focus and employee needs, and the capability to comprehend and differentiate actions and intent.

Toxicity for CFO participants meant leaders who operate a dictatorship, micromanage employees, and do not foster an employee/supervisor relationship. Moreover, the CFO participants felt not owning your mistakes, having a lack of responsiveness, forcing blame on others, lack of communication skills, and not controlling your own emotions qualified as toxicity. Also included in the toxicity versus accountability qualifiers was a general lack of care for all employees through actions or words and leaders that lack soft skills, particularly empathy.

### **RQ3/IQ8:**

**Interview Question Eight: *How do different generations view and perceive toxic leadership differently?***

#### Summary of results:

Participants of this study were grouped by age into corresponding generation groups corresponding. Generations identified this study were Generation X (1961-1979), Millennials (1980-1994), and Generation Z (1995-2010s). Due to the inconsistency in generation start/end years based on geographical location, the approximate dates stated by Twenge and Donnelly were used (2015).

The one Generation Z participant felt their generation was soft and where an individual grew up drove their perceptions of toxic leadership. The participant stated overarchingly that firefighters complain about everything; however, delineated Gen-Zs with “The older Gen-Zs might grumble, but we get the job done.” Additionally, the participant how, generationally speaking, the senior generations do not understand the ones that follow. This participant did feel the need to regularly bridge the generational gap to Millennials and Generation X leaders by explaining younger Generation Z employees.

When compared to Generation X and Generation Z, Millennials are the largest generation group in the workforce [fire service] today. There were 11 study participants (73%) who were categorized as Millennials, which aligns with current fire department concentrations of Generations Z, Millennial, and Generation X employees. Hand-coding participant responses for RQ3/IQ8 generated four themes for Millennial firefighters (Table 11), three themes for Generation X firefighters (Table 13), and a cross-generational theme shared by Generation X and Millennials (Table 12). The four Millennial themes identified were: (a) Responding to *TL* in a consistent and predictable manner, (b) view and understanding *TL* and Generation X employees, (c) understanding of Generation Z and *TLs*, and (d) explanations of *TL* and Millennial employee interaction. Each of the themes had sub-theme examples that expand information in each table.

**Table 11**

*Millennials and Toxic Leadership Emerging Themes*

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**Responding to *TL* in a Consistent and Predictable Manner**

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Putting up with and tolerate less toxicity in leaders  
 Willing to pick up lives and move on to a new job  
 More pressure and anxiety with *TL*, which can cost us our careers

---

**View and Understanding of *TL* and Generation X Employees**

---

Struggle to communicate with younger generations  
 Don't let younger generations have a voice  
 Need to have more empathy and sympathy for younger generations  
 Won't assign the same *TL* label as younger generations  
 Leadership methods are antiquated and don't apply  
 Are afraid of yelling and stay quiet when working for *TLs*

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### Understanding of Generation Z and *TL*

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Want to know “why”

Comfort using social media to identify *TLs* because of open source complaining

Care less about *TL* pressure

More feeling based and needing regular appreciation

Shut down with *TL*

Perceive correction and accountability as *TL*

---

### Explanations of *TL* and Millennial Employee Interaction

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Generational awareness and perspective are key in multi-generational leadership

Generations have different and changing needs

Not scared to stand and fight

Perception of *TL* is based on life experiences and upbringing

*ELs* care about mental and physical health so firefighters can do the mission

---

The multi-generational themes listed in Table 12 were statements by both Millennial and Generation X participants that represented shared understanding. No other participant statements were cross-generational. Most participants statements identified the generation they were discussing by referencing *the newer* or *the younger* and *the older* [generations] in addition to their perspective of other generations’ understanding of *TL*.

**Table 12**

*Multi-Generational (Millennial & Gen-X) Interpretations of TL*

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All generations label *TL* differently through experiences

All generations view *TL* in different ways than other generations

All generations recognize *TL* the same, but all generations react differently

---

Generation X participants represented 20% of participants. Participant responses were short and when dissected, only created 11 distinct statements. The statements generated three emerging themes, which were: (a) Understanding *TL*, *EL*, and other generations, (b) Generation X and spatial awareness of *TL*, and (c) labeling leadership as toxic or effective. Table 13 shows further developed sub-groups within each theme.

**Table 13**

*Generation X on TL, Applied to Millennial and Generation Z*

<b>Understanding <i>TL</i>, <i>EL</i>, and Other Generations</b>
Different teaching methods and styles have been used across all generations
Toxic is toxic — people view <i>TL</i> pretty much the same
<i>ELs</i> get different reactions from each generation even though it is the same thing
<i>ELs</i> need to be aware of how they lead, act, and what is said to different generations
<b>Generation X and Spatial Awareness of <i>TL</i></b>
<i>TL</i> is an increasing column of concern going from older to younger generations
As you get younger in generations the inclination to label something “toxic” gets greater
“ <i>TL</i> ” disappears when you get past [us] Gen-X
<b>Labeling Leadership as Toxic or Effective</b>
“Toxic” is a term coined by newer generations, the same as “brown shoe” is associated with older generations
Older generations will not assign the same label as younger generations
It is relevant to what people were exposed to and grew up with in their careers
It differs by the generation you are dealing with

Overall, participant responses were dissected into 77 sub statements from which eight emerging themes were seen. Millennial responses were the most detailed and Generation X were the shortest. The complexity of participant responses presented a by-generation and cross-

generation view of how each generation saw, perceived, interpreted, and responded to toxic leadership.

### **Preface to GQ/IQ9 and IQ10:**

Table 14 represents respondent make-up by generational make-up. Distribution of participant per generation was 7% Generation Z, 73% Millennial, and 20% Generation X. It was important to note that Generation X participants made up one-fifth of the study group and encountered zero *TLs* in the previous 30-days and only heard about *TLs* at a rate of 3% over the previous 30-days. With Millennial participants making up 73% of the study group the rate of encountering *TLs* (87%) or hearing about *TLs* (84%) in the previous 30-days was expected. Generation Z's participant rate (7%) returned reasonable experiences with *TLs* in the previous 30-days with 13% of encounters and 13% heard from others.

**Table 14**

*Participant Generational Make-Up vs. TL Encounters and TLs Heard About*

<b>Generational vs. <i>TLs</i></b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Encounters with <i>TLs</i></b>	<b>Heard About <i>TLs</i></b>
Generation Z	7%	13%	13%
Millennial	73%	87%	84%
Generation X	20%	0%	3%

### **GQ/IQ9:**

**Interview Question Nine: *How many times have you witnessed toxic leadership in the last month?***

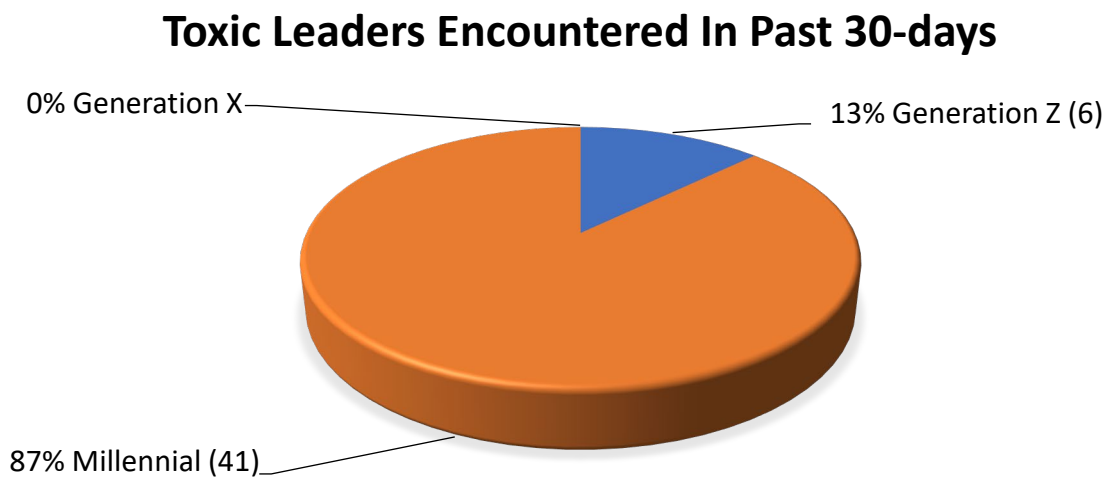
#### Summary of results:

Five participants (33%) reported encountering *TLs* in the previous 30-days with a collective encounter total of 47. 10 participants (66%) reported they had encountered zero *TLs* in

the previous 30-days. As seen in Figure 9, six of the *TL* encounters (13%) were from Generation Z participants and 41 (87%) were from Millennial participants. Generation X participants encountered 0% of all *TL* encounters in the past 30-days.

**Figure 9**

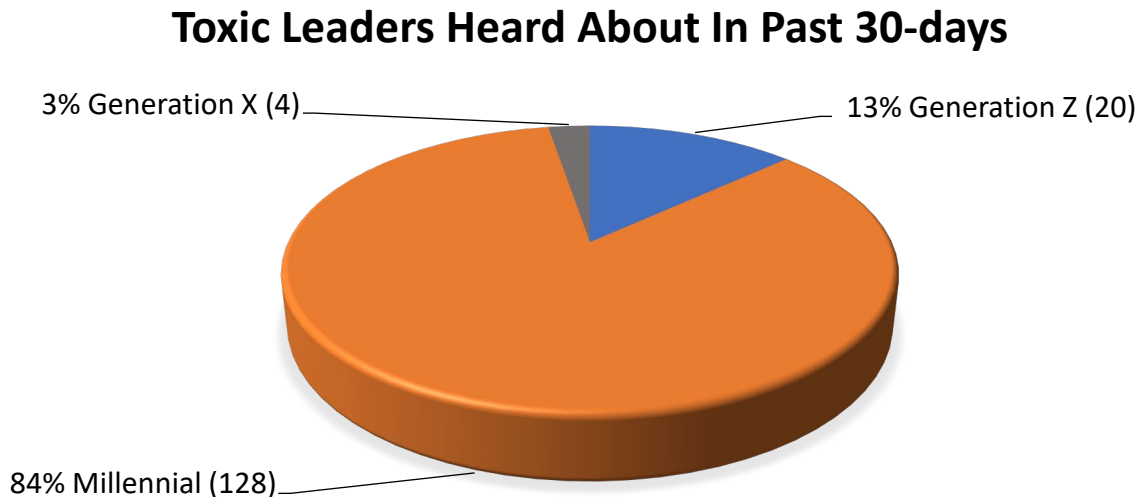
*Toxic Leaders Encountered by Generation*



**GQ/IQ10:**

**Interview Question Ten: *How often have you heard peers talk about toxic leadership in the last month?***

Eleven participants (74%) reported hearing about *TLs* in the previous 30-days with a collective encounter total of 152. Four participants (26%) reported they had heard about zero *TLs* in the previous 30-days. As seen in Figure 10, of 20 *TLs* heard about (13%) were from Generation Z participants and 128 (84%) were from Millennial participants. Generation X participants heard about four (3%) of all *TLs* experiences in the past 30-days.

**Figure 10***Toxic Leaders Heard About by Generation***Review of Identified Emerging Themes and Empirical Data.**

Twenty-six themes emerged during research review, hand-coding, and presenting study results. Themes are listed sequentially in Table 15. Empirical data extracted using two data coding methods returned a 17% to 92% (Method One) and a 21% to 79% (Method Two) match rate for participants when identifying characteristics, traits, and behaviors of toxic leaders.

**RQ1/IQ1:** (a) Inadequacies in leadership ability; (b) illegal, immoral, and unethical behavior; (c) actions or behavior that had negative effects on employees; and (d) behavior that was selfish or for themselves.

**RQ1/IQ2:** *Data Coding Method One.* Utilizing Table 1 as comparison, participant match rate ranged between 17% and 92%, with an average match percentage rate of 50%. This method demonstrated a higher understanding of *TL* and the characteristics, traits, and behaviors associated. *Data Coding Method Two.* Utilizing Table 2 as comparison, participant match rate ranged between 21% and 79%, with an average match rate of

51%. This method was similar to data coding method two and demonstrated a higher, but not fully complete, understanding of *TL*.

**RQ2/IQ4:** (a) *ELs* are extroverted and display emotional intelligence; (b) *ELs* are charismatic, inspirational, and helpful; (c) *ELs* are great communicators; (d) *ELs* are humble and sincere; (e) *ELs* are accountable, fair, balanced, and efficient; and (f) *ELs* are action and goal focused, results driven, and have priorities and drive.

**RQ2/IQ5:** (a) *TLs* have the ability to be effective but at the cost of the people and organization, and (b) employees of *TLs* identify toxic leadership faster and more completely than the *TLs* superiors or peers.

**RQ2/IQ6:** Outcomes of *EL*: (a) Positive environmental outcomes; (b) confident employee and individual outcomes; (c) constructive agency, team, task outcomes; and (d) effective leadership outcomes.

**RQ3/IQ7:** *10 Qualities of Accountable Leaders; 10 Toxic Leader Deficiencies in Accountability.*

**RQ3/IQ8:** *Millennial Themes:* (a) Responding to *TL* in a consistent and predictable manner, (b) view and understanding *TL* and Generation X employees, (c) understanding of Generation Z and *TLs*, and (d) explanations of *TL* and Millennial employee Interaction. *Generation X themes:* (a) Understanding *TL*, *EL*, and other generations, (b) Generation X and spatial awareness of *TL*, and (c) labeling leadership as toxic or effective.

### Summary

This qualitative study began with the simplified problem statement of whether firefighters at all levels of a fire department can identify the characteristics and traits of a toxic fire service leader. The purpose was to utilize generic qualitative research methods further to

evaluate the understanding of toxic leadership in the fire service. Three research questions drove the study, which used 15 questions presented in an interview format to selected participants. General questions one through five validated the demographics of each participant, and interview questions one through ten were designed to elicit a participant response that expanded on the three research questions.

The study's request for participation produced 52 respondents with varied backgrounds, time in service, and positions within the fire service. A randomized selection process was used to identify 15 participants with a balance of three participants for each of the five agency position groups. Participants were interviewed using Microsoft Teams, which produced a transcript of questions presented and responses given that were hand-coded to tabulate results and determine themes, similarities, or differences.

The results of interviews with a diverse audience actively working in different fire service positions, part of different generational groups, and with different career experiences were beneficial to the study. The results gleaned from the interview questions showed comprehension (i.e., percentage-based) of toxic leaders' characteristics, traits, and behaviors. Additionally, study results generate 26 emerging themes that tie directly to the study's core, three research questions designed to answer the study's problem and purpose statements.

Chapter Five, the final chapter of this study, presents a precise summary of the data collected and conclusions and how they tie to toxic leadership in the fire service. A limitations section discusses any unforeseen flaws in emerging information that lack quality for conclusive presentation, which need further study. A correlation to the fire service provides readers with an understanding of this study's impact on the fire service. The final component is topics

recommended for future studies to increase a holistic understanding of toxicity and toxic leaders in the fire service.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Summary of the Results

Leading firefighters goes beyond the bugles on your collar. This study researched leadership toxicity and firefighters' ability to recognize characteristics, traits, and behaviors of toxic fire service leaders. "The volatility and high complexity of organizational environments present demanding challenges to management. The way people are conducted in their work may lead to different outputs, which is one reason why leadership has been so broadly studied" (Semedo et al., 2022, p. 1885). The results of this study suggest that firefighters can adequately identify an appropriate number of attributes associated with toxic leadership at an average rate above 50% when asked to describe a toxic leader. Participants described having experienced varying amounts of toxic leaders across their careers, with some participants experiencing zero toxic leaders to other participants who had experienced up to eight or nine.

The age group experiencing the largest amount of toxic leaders over their career was 31–40-year-old firefighters, who made up 40% of the study participants, and had experienced 25 toxic leaders collectively. The position group that experienced the most was senior fire officers, who collectively experienced 16 toxic leaders over their careers. When comparing toxic leaders to effective leaders, participants described key differences of *ELs* as extroversion, emotional intelligence, charismatic and inspirational, effective communicators, humility and sincerity, efficiency, fairness and balance, goal focused, driven, fair, and accountable to their actions. Study participants cited *TL* inadequacies as un-sustained and accidental effectiveness, having a small scope of power, breeding minimum standard employees, not accountable to individual and agency issues, inciting agency strife and in-fighting, degraded performance and mission accomplishment, and high attrition or turn-over rates.

Participants were asked to provide defining factors that delineated accountability necessary in the fire service and that of *TLs*. Responses were grouped in a manner that transitioned into two lists of factors. First, the *10 Qualities of Accountable Leaders* and second, the *10 Toxic Leader Deficiencies in Accountability*. Both lists were identified in Tables 9 and 10, respectively. The most pointed input from participants was that from a generational perspective.

The study group participants were either Generation X, Millennial, or Generation Z, with Millennials making up just short of three-quarters of the 15 participants. Millennial responses were captured in five main themes with 20 sub-themes. Generation X responses generated three main themes with 11 sub-themes. Generation Z, Millennial, and Generation X participants effectively identified *EL* and *TL*, with caveats based on generational perspective. Additionally, participants were able to provide responses that generated three absolutes: (a) All generations label *TL* differently through experiences; (b) all generations view *TL* in different ways than other generations; and (c) all generations recognize *TL* the same, but all generations react differently. Interestingly, the concentration of Generation X participants was 20%; however, their encounters with *TLs* and hearing *TLs* about from others was 0% and 3%, respectively.

While analyzing the data produced during the study, overarching themes arose during the collation, tabulation, deciphering, and presentation of results. All interview questions (IQ) generated feedback and qualifiable data that provided direct and substantial content for RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. Themes and empirical data generated by this research study are sequentially listed in Table 15. The list of themes in this table identifies the corresponding RQ it provides results for. An outlying observation of interviews was that 14 of 15 participants only referred to *TLs* and *ELs* as he or him; only one participant used the pronoun she when referring a *TL* or *EL*.

**Table 15***Sequential Emerging Themes and Empirical Data*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Corresponding Research Question</b>
(1) Inadequacies in leadership ability.	RQ1
(2) Illegal, immoral, and unethical behavior.	RQ1
(3) Actions or behavior that had negative effects on employees.	RQ1
(4) Behavior that was selfish or for themselves.	RQ1
(6) <i>ELs</i> are extroverted and display emotional intelligence.	RQ2
(7) <i>ELs</i> are charismatic, inspirational, and helpful.	RQ2
(8) <i>ELs</i> are great communicators.	RQ2
(9) <i>ELs</i> are humble and sincere.	RQ2
(10) <i>ELs</i> are accountable, fair, balanced, and efficient.	RQ2
(11) <i>ELs</i> are action and goal focused, results driven, and have priorities and drive.	RQ2
(12) <i>TLs</i> can be effective but at the cost of the people and organization.	RQ2
(13) Employees of <i>TLs</i> identify toxic leadership faster and more completely than the <i>TLs</i> superiors or peers.	RQ2
(14) <i>ELs</i> vs <i>TLs</i> ; positive environmental outcomes.	RQ2
(15) <i>ELs</i> vs <i>TLs</i> ; confident employee and individual outcomes.	RQ2
(16) <i>ELs</i> vs <i>TLs</i> ; constructive agency, team, task outcomes.	RQ2
(17) <i>ELs</i> vs <i>TLs</i> ; effective leadership outcomes	RQ2
(18) <i>10 Qualities of Accountable Leaders</i> .	RQ2
(19) <i>10 Toxic Leader Deficiencies in Accountability</i> .	RQ3
(20) <i>Millennial Theme</i> : Responding to <i>TL</i> in a consistent and predictable manner.	RQ3
(21) <i>Millennial Theme</i> : View and understanding <i>TL</i> and Generation X employees.	RQ3
(22) <i>Millennial Theme</i> : Understanding of Generation Z and <i>TLs</i> .	RQ3

(23) <i>Millennial Themes</i> : Explanations of <i>TL</i> and Millennial employee Interaction.	RQ3
(24) <i>Generation X Theme</i> : Understanding <i>TL</i> , <i>EL</i> , and other generations.	RQ3
(25) <i>Generation X Theme</i> : Generation X and spatial awareness of <i>TL</i> .	RQ3
(26) <i>Generation X Theme</i> : Labeling leadership as toxic or effective.	RQ3
<b>Empirical Data</b>	<b>Corresponding Research Question</b>
Identifying Characteristics, traits, and Behaviors.	
Qualification Method-1. 17% - 92% match rate; average 51%.	RQ1
Qualification Method-2. 21% - 79% match rate; average 50%.	RQ1

### Conclusions Based Upon Results

As a stand-alone document, this research study effectively peels back the first layer of the discussion on identifying toxic leadership in the fire service. Individually, the data reported in this study provides a foundation for the fire service to better its firefighters and officers through structured and abstract study of toxicity. More specifically, how it is interpreted and understood, what actions and behavior contribute to the labeling as a toxic leader, and what generational, positional, or socio-economic factors contribute to defining toxic leadership.

As part of an archive of studies on toxic leadership in the fire service, such as Wheeler's (2022) doctoral submission, *Effective Leadership in the US Fire Service*, this research study will help firefighters through executive fire officers, dig deeper into understanding toxic leadership as it applies to the fire department. Additionally, the aggregate of fire service-specific studies and scholarly literature allows a greater understanding of leadership toxicity as the career field

crosses over generations of firefighters. Special note should be paid to significant research that has already been accomplished on toxic leadership in general over the last decade; however, this study is not a fully encompassing or definitive piece, instead an attempt to ascertain leader practices, behaviors, traits, characteristics, and attributes drive firefighters to label those above and around them, *toxic*.

### **Affirmation of research questions.**

Three questions were used to drive this study past the problem and purpose statements; they were:

RQ 1 - How accurately are firefighters able to identify the characteristics of toxic leadership?

RQ 2 - How do firefighters differentiate the effectiveness of those not demonstrating toxic leadership?

RQ 3 - Do generational perspectives or worldviews affect an individual's interpretation of toxic leadership?

### **Findings on RQ 1.**

Research data shows that participants could collectively identify half of the agreed-upon characteristics of toxic leadership. The two data models used to decipher participant responses regarding key toxic leader characteristics, traits, and behaviors, percent matches reached 72% and 92% (on separate methods). Comparatively, this match rate represents a reasonable understanding of toxic leaders.

Corroborated: RQ 1 was found to be valid and answered in the affirmative. Firefighters do have the ability to correctly identify an average number of key toxic leader characteristics, traits, and behaviors. Participants in all agency position groups, regardless of age and career tenure, were able to satisfy practical accuracy when identifying toxic leaders.

**Findings on RQ 2.**

When asked to provide answers to whether an effective leader could be differentiated from a toxic leader, participants provided responses that aligned with non-fire service descriptions of effective and toxic leaders. Participants gave specific examples during their interviews of situations within their respective fire departments that aligned with non-fire service examples. Though core leader behaviors have endured since Attila the Hun and before, the method of application and accepted social behavior has changed.

Very much to the point, Participant #9 stated, “Toxic is a term coined by the newer generation, the same as ‘brown shoe’ is associated with older generations.” Based on participant responses, it is easiest to state that effective leaders have *gross* effectiveness. In contrast, toxic leaders have *net* effectiveness, meaning all 15 participants recognized minimal effectiveness regarding toxic leaders. Effective leaders were credited with continued and holistic effectiveness due to possessing the positive attributes of leadership.

Corroborated: RQ2 was found to be valid and answered in the affirmative. Firefighters of different statuses and tenure could actively describe the effectiveness of both toxic and effective leaders. When responses were grouped, participants defined effective outcomes as related to environmental (e.g., morale, work ethic, palpability of happiness or tension), employee or individual outcomes (e.g., development, progression, competence), agency and team or task (e.g., competence, objective/goal achievement, endurance, resilience), and leadership (e.g., team building, ability, transparency, action, reciprocation).

**Findings on RQ 3.**

Highly debated, generational perspectives present multiple views on whether a leader is toxic. Generation X participants aptly defined and illustrated experiences with toxic leadership; however, the Gen-X optic presented matter-of-fact leadership with little emotional connection to actions (i.e., business is business) and understood that descendant generations would think and react differently. This is an acknowledgment that Generation X leaders are unwilling, or are unable, to bridge the gap between Millennial and Generation Z firefighters. An example of this is the statement from a chief fire officer, “How am I supposed to correct 18 years of bad parenting.”

Millennial participants were also acutely aware of generational differences, noting that ‘older’ generations acted/led in certain ways with specific traits and methods, and ‘younger’ generations were more emotion-based and required more consistent positive strokes to maintain productivity. Participants also acknowledged a general indifference to work (i.e., the job is a job and there to do just that) with the ability to leave employment to follow a different path and motivation to actively argue and challenge sub-standard (read: toxic) leadership. The Generation Z participant was conscious of toxic leadership at varying levels, citing that their generation was soft; however, Gen-Z noted that challenging toxic leadership would result in deflection, deception, or ‘gaslighting’ by the leader.

A shared understanding of toxic leadership was present among all three generations interviewed. All generations agreed that worldview significantly influenced a firefighter’s perspective on toxic leadership and how the firefighter would react. Also present was a shared agreeance on shifting tolerances from Gen-X down to Gen-Z. All agreed that ‘deal breakers,’ which were illegal, immoral, and unethical actions, were undeniable toxic leader behavior. All

three generations agreed that approach, teaching method, and leadership style vary by generation, and each generation requires different motivation, engagement, and management styles for optimal results.

Corroborated: RQ3 was found to be valid and answered in the affirmative. Generational perspectives and worldviews categorically affect a firefighter's interpretation of toxic leadership and what makes an effective leader. An aggregate of participant statements explains the ideal approach to generations and the avoidance of toxic leadership or being labeled as a toxic leader. "Generation awareness and perspective is key in multi-generational management."

### **Limitations**

Limitations existed in this research project. The study was conducted through a broad call for participation to the four service branches of the Department of Defense (DoD) fire protection community and local fire departments within 100 miles. Respondents totaled 52: Two Army, six Navy, two Marine, 41 Air Force, and zero local firefighters (including civilian and military firefighters). A randomized selection of participants yielded 13 Air Force and two Navy participants. This imbalance of service representation may not correctly reflect non-federal fire perspectives on toxic and effective leadership. Additionally, the participant service affiliation may not represent all perspectives of Army, Navy, and Marine Corps firefighters.

Of the 52 respondents, three were female firefighters. The selection process only yielded one female participant. The disproportion of female participants has the potential to not effectively represent the understanding and perspective of female firefighters regarding toxic and effective leadership. Recent diversity and inclusion initiatives within the Air Force have shown

disparities between female and male firefighters; however, they cannot be adequately included in this research study due to the representation of female firefighters.

Participants selected for this study: One for Generation Z, 11 for Millennial, and three for Generation X. Purdue Global shows the current workplace generational makeup of 33% Generation X, 35% Millennial, and 5% Generation Z ([www.pudueglobal.edu](http://www.pudueglobal.edu)). The study participant breakdown was 20% Generation X, 73% Millennial, and 7% Generation Z. While different than economic percentages, research results provide a snapshot of perspectives, understanding, and interpretation of generational differences and opinions on toxic and effective leadership. The study results may not reflect a complete generation-specific data set for each generation's view of toxic and effective leadership.

In addition to the aforementioned limitations, this study did not intend to seek an ethnic, racial, or religious balance of participants. Accordingly, this study focused on participant opinions based on agency position and age groups (i.e., generational groups). Results of the study based on sample size and makeup do not guarantee accuracy and can unlikely be applied to the entire career field. Instead, the participant group and subsequent results presented data and information that future research studies can build upon.

### **Implications and Recommendations to the Field**

This qualitative study has produced research results that meaningfully provoke thought and challenge perspectives on toxic leadership in the fire service. At the forefront is the need for each generation of firefighters to look past the previous convictions of other generations and take time to understand how each generation came to its current state. Cross-generational understanding is critical to the sustainment and future of our firefighting workforce. Creating a

disequilibrium of assumed generational roles is a step towards addressing how we can bridge the divide.

Study results reflected that more than a general awareness of identifying characteristics, traits, and behaviors of toxic leaders exists. Results also show an increasing emphasis on labeling leaders as toxic when going from older to younger generations. The fire service should view the complex issue of toxic leadership versus effective leadership as an adaptive challenge that requires an all-in effort. Northouse (2019) identified the adaptive process of change where followers are prepared and encouraged to explore boundaries and barriers.

Research concluded that identification of toxic leadership characteristics, traits, and behaviors by participants was average, to below or above average in some participants. This presents an opportunity for fire departments in general to increase awareness and education of toxicity components validated by research. With an imbalance regarding perceptions of toxic and effective leadership between tenure groups and agency positions, the foremost need is cross-generational agreeance on defining, identifying, addressing, and removal of toxic leaders from our ranks. The task of removal must not be a one-time event; it should be as continuous as fire engine pump testing. As a substantial current and evolving topic, specific importance should be paid to emerging trends and changes in toxic leadership descriptors and label application.

The delicate aspect of merging subordinate evaluation of a supervisor, the evaluation of peers, and supervisor evaluation is discussion that warrants consideration from the smallest to the largest fire department. 360-degree feedback has proven valuable in assessment of emergency scenes to gain the greatest foothold on leading firefighters to a successful outcome. Some participants noted that the view from below is far different than the view from above, which ties directly to self-serving and toxic behavior of leaders looking to better their situation versus that

of the team or the organization. A true 360-degree appraisal system that, in part, incorporates feedback from subordinates within the chain of command, presenting as many challenges (e.g., sabotaging action from non-satisfied employees) as potential for increasing leader transparency and effectiveness.

The need to transition the fire service to a generationally balanced collection of consummate and highly educated firefighters, schooled in every aspect of our profession while ensuring each different worldview has a voice, while harmoniously driven to provide exceptional customer services through the eradication of toxic leaders is a lofty, potential utopian, goal. Research, theory, and genuine application concerning the topic of toxic leadership is the true step one. Creating a foundation through cataloged and collated studies of toxic leadership specifically related to the fire service will enhance our ability to ensure a future of enhanced trust and performance.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Building on the results of the preparation and research conducted in this study, the opportunity exists to widen the aperture on toxic leadership in the fire service. The research had a small, randomly selected participant group of 15 people from a purposive respondent pool. According to the Fahy et al. (2022) during a study for the National Fire Protection Association, in 2020, the US career and volunteer firefighter population was estimated at 1,041,200. Increasing the study group size in a similar project would provide more complete data sets and statistics than the exploratory research conducted in this study.

The research participants for this study were unequally distributed across three generations with a distribution of one Generation Z, 11 Millennial, and three Generation X. To

achieve a balanced perspective by generation and valid cross-generation results, a study focused on generation or larger study groups per generation should be accomplished. This method and scope of analysis would yield a better understanding of toxic leadership in the fire service from a generational approach.

Another limitation of the research presented in this study was the gender disparity. Of the study respondents, only three were female — of the randomly selected participants, only one was female. Though this study generated a foundation for future work, the non-male perspective is a vital optic that should be accounted for correctly when seeking a holistic view of toxic leadership in the fire service. Expanding on this, a Department of Defense workforce study delineating military, civilian, and government contract firefighters regarding identifying toxic leadership would pay dividends to the future of fire and emergency services across service branches.

The final recommendation for future research is to accomplish foundational and complex research on identifying the characteristics of *toxic followers* in the fire service. With significant non-fire service leaders and preliminary fire service leaders' toxic traits, the depth and breadth of research about toxic followers in the fire service is unknown. All recommendations in this section are based on limitations identified during this research study.

### **Conclusion**

The work included in this qualitative study focused on understanding toxic leadership in the fire service. Before research, a comprehensive literature review was accomplished to ascertain what contemporary research specifically addressed fire service leaders. The literature did provide extensive peer-reviewed work that identified and addressed toxic leadership in the civil sector and military; however, not in a para-military organization like the fire service.

The research study selected a small study group of 15 participants from 52 equally balanced respondents across five agency position groups. Three overarching research questions drove the development of interview questions that probed into the topic from a professional and personal perspective. In all, 166 pages of transcribed participant responses were gathered, analyzed, and interpreted for the study. Results showed a decent understanding of identifying toxic leadership, adequate ability to differentiate toxic and effective leadership, and generation-specific interpretations of toxic leadership, including a common multi-generational awareness of core toxic leader behaviors.

This is only a foray into understanding toxic leadership in the fire service. A service steeped in tradition, pride, and performance. A service with long-standing impressions of stoic and abrasive fire chiefs, leading firefighters to pre-determined versions of line staff and officers. Versions accepted by the organization, executing methods and operations from *The Chief's* perspective only. The battle is not lost or won by one; it is a vision of success implemented and executed at varying levels of leadership and fulfilled by competent subordinate staff. Toxicity does not have a place in the future of firefighting and the fire service. It requires harnessing all employees' thoughts, beliefs, abilities, and perceptions to authenticate leadership and command presence at all tiers and who is invested in The People, The Organization, and The Customers.

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A**

**Email to Air Force Fire Chief for Research Participants**

**To:** [REDACTED] CIV USAF HAF AF [REDACTED]@us.af.mil>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] USAF HAF AF [REDACTED]@us.af.mil>  
**Subject:** Request for Ex. Fire Officer Research Study Participation

Chiefs,

Would you mind sharing this across the DoD Chiefs and down the AF side, please?

- [REDACTED]

-----  
Fire Professionals,

I will be completing research for the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program over the next couple months.

I am looking for 10-15 firefighters (all ranks) in the DoD fire community willing to participate. Those volunteers chosen to participate will be selected from specific groupings (e.g., career status, age, tenure, gender, agency position). I intend to have a primary sample population and list of alternates should a primary need to withdraw or is unable to complete the research.

If you are interested, please reply by email at [REDACTED][@gmail.com](mailto:[REDACTED]@gmail.com) and provide the best email and phone contact, using the email subject "EFO STUDY PARTICIPANT."

The topic of this research will be revealed to participants as one-on-one research begins so responses are as little premeditated as possible.

Respectfully,

- [REDACTED]

//SIGNED//  
[REDACTED], MPA, CFO  
Deputy Chief, Fire & Emergency Services

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

DSN: [REDACTED]  
COMM: [REDACTED]  
DISPATCH: [REDACTED]  
CELL: [REDACTED]  
EMAIL: [REDACTED] [@us.af.mil](mailto:[REDACTED]@us.af.mil)  
[REDACTED]

## Appendix B

### Interview Consent Form

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*M5104: Exercise of Executive Leadership: Capstone I*

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#### Interview Consent Form

##### Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jason W. Berry from the National Fire Academy (NFA). The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of a critical issue in the fire and emergency services. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of their final project.

##### Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experience within a particular community. **An audio or audio-video recording of the interview will be taken for transcription purposes. The audio or audio-video file will be deleted at the conclusion of the study and will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher.** You may turn off your camera if you do not wish to be filmed.

##### Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately **60 minutes** of your time.

##### Risks

The researcher does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

The NFA and its contractors take no responsibility for the actions or outcomes of the research study.

##### Benefits

**There are no direct benefits to the participant; however, information from this study may benefit your and other communities in the future.**

##### Incentives

**There are no incentives (financial or otherwise) associated with participation in this study.**

##### Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented to NFA program faculty and students. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers (including audio or audio-video recordings) will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

##### Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion, or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

<b>Jason W. Berry</b>	<b>Dr. Harold C. Cohen</b>
Student	Instructor
National Fire Academy	National Fire Academy
jason.berry.14@us.af.mil	emshc@aol.com

**Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form, and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have received satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

- I give consent to be filmed and audio recorded during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (interviewee initials)
- I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (interviewee initials)

Interviewer Signature		Date:	
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Interviewee Signature		Date:	
Interviewee Signature		Date:	

Appendix C

Participant Data Masked Demographics Record

Participant	Locality		Career Status				Agency Position													
	Local	Non-Local	Paid	Non-Paid	≤ 30	31-40	41-50	≥ 51	Male	Female	Other <sup>1</sup>	1-10	11-20	21-30	≥ 31	FF <sup>2</sup>	D/O <sup>3</sup>	CO <sup>4</sup>	SFO <sup>5</sup>	CFO <sup>6</sup>
1		X	X		X				X			X				X				
2		X	X		X					X									X	
3		X	X				X		X									X		
4		X	X		X				X								X			
5		X	X			X			X				X			X				
6		X	X			X			X				X							X
7		X	X			X			X			X						X		
8		X	X					X	X						X				X	
9		X	X					X	X						X					X
10		X	X			X			X			X					X			
11		X	X		X				X								X			
12		X	X		X				X									X		
13		X	X					X	X						X					X
14		X	X			X			X				X			X				
15		X	X			X			X					X					X	

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Other - Includes: preferred not to say, non-binary, transgender, gender identification

<sup>2</sup> FF - Firefighter

<sup>3</sup> D/O - Driver/Operator

<sup>4</sup> CO - Company Officer

<sup>5</sup> SFO - Senior Fire Officer

<sup>6</sup> CFO - Chief Fire Officer

**Appendix D**

**Respondent Data-Masked Respondent Sorting**

Initial Respondent Sorting												
Last, First Name	1-n	<u>Career Status</u>		<u>Service Affiliation</u>					<u>Position</u>			
		Paid	Vol	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps	FF	D/O	CO	SFO	CFO
Respondent	1	X				X				X		
Respondent	2	X				X		X				
Respondent	3	X				X					X	
Respondent	4	X				X						X
Respondent	5	X				X				X		
Respondent	6	X				X		X				
Respondent	7	X				X				X		
Respondent	8	X				X						X
Respondent	9	X				X					X	
Respondent	10	X				X						X
Respondent	11	X				X						X
Respondent	12	X				X						X
Respondent	13	X				X					X	
Respondent	14	X				X					X	
Respondent	15	X				X					X	
Respondent	16	X				X						X
Respondent	17	X				X					X	
Respondent	18	X				X					X	
Respondent	19	X					X			X		
Respondent	20	X				X		X				

Respondent	21	X			X			X		
Respondent	22	X			X					X
Respondent	23	X			X					X
Respondent	24	X	X							X
Respondent	25	X		X						X
Respondent	26	X			X			X		
Respondent	27	X			X					X
Respondent	28	X			X			X		
Respondent	29	X			X			X		
Respondent	30	X	X							X
Respondent	31	X			X	X				
Respondent	32	X			X					X
Respondent	33	X			X			X		
Respondent	34	X			X					X
Respondent	35	X			X			X		
Respondent	36	X			X	X				
Respondent	37	X			X	X				
Respondent	38	X		X						X
Respondent	39	X			X			X		
Respondent	40	X				X				
Respondent	41	X		X		X				
Respondent	42	X		X						X
Respondent	43	X		X						X
Respondent	44	X				X				X
Respondent	45	X			X					X
Respondent	46	X		X						X
Respondent	47	X			X			X		
Respondent	48	X			X			X		
Respondent	49	X			X			X		



**Appendix E****Random Sequence Numbers Used for Selection**

The following random sequence of 1-52 was generated on July 5, 2023, from [www.random.org](http://www.random.org).

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41	2
15	43
33	22
12	47
27	39
5	52
40	28
9	23
25	7
46	11
44	29
10	4
26	45
48	13
34	32
30	49
24	1
42	21
35	36
37	20
18	17
14	6
50	19
3	8
51	31
38	- n
16	

**Appendix F**

**RQ1/IQ2 - Summary of Participant Responses**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?</b>	<b>5</b>	
<b>1</b>	Spends too much time in office, does not relate with firefighters. There is no good relationship between upper management and Ops...camaraderie. Someone that is distancing themselves and not trying to be part of the group. Do as I say, not as I do. Not leading by example. Tardiness, calling out sick all the time, not around, disappears when there is work to be done.		Selfish abuse of power. Usually, TLs want to retain knowledge to maintain power. Devoid of transparency, moves are occluded so a firefighter does not know what the strategic plan or forward path is. Consolidate and keep of power. No power sharing, no mentoring and developing...the organization doesn't move forward.
<b>2</b>	Stubborn, hardheaded, very ownership/close hold, consistently being reported for things (e.g., sexual harassment, hazing, illegal/immoral/unethical behavior), showing negative trends.		
<b>3</b>	Micromanaging often, insecurity, desire to control (possessive), lack of understanding, personal agenda. Lack of trust (stems from insecurities), inability to build trust with their people and organization.		
			<b>Participant</b> <b>What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?</b>
<b>Participant</b>	<b>What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?</b>		
<b>4</b>	Egotistical, somewhat narcissistic, always trying to bring those around them down.		

- 6 Inability to control emotion, lots of anger, TLs will yell and belittle in front of others. Supposed to correct in private and praise in public. TLs will belittle and demean regardless of environment and who is around. 10
- 11 An example: an AC is coordinating an event and another AC has folks doing other things, AC A is telling AC B what a garbage individual they are and how they suck at life vs handling the situation in private and sorting out differences.
- 12 Refuses to deal with situations (struggling FF but TL won't address it or give it up). Ignore issues...they'll pass the issue off on others. Kicking the can down the road...it is the job of the leaders to deal with issues. We are family.
- 7 Laziness is a really big trait. You cannot just be a leader and do nothing. Gainfully employed...working and doing the little things that don't always get seen. Pettiness, unruliness. A lot of trust goes in leaders to make the right calls, and a toxic leader may not be doing that or other shady things. Corrupt morals. Could become part of illegal activities.
- 8 Insensitivity. No empathy, no compassion.

- Belittles and demeans people. Narcissistic. Yells in public, shows up late. Impatient, lack of empathy, arrogant.
- TLs are selfish, egotistical, have behavioral issues, constantly setting an image that frightens people vs welcoming. Perception is reality, so some TL bosses/leaders will come out as not as toxic but will be very toxic behind the scenes. Lack of Discretion. A TL doesn't stand up for his people.
- Stubbornness, even though it has its place, it isn't the right type of stubbornness. Laziness and complacency. Status-quo...I'm doing what I do because it is all I need to do. "It's not in my PD." When these are prominent, it shows you are here for yourself ... selfishness.
- Inability to self-reflect and change/grow.
- Toxic leaders are reactive vs proactive. Very reactive.

**Participant What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?**

**Participant What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with toxic leaders?**

- 9 Disruptive, disrespectful, unprofessional, no empathy, uncaring, not committed, selfish, rude, and the sort.

- 13 This walks down the same line of perception vs reality. Commonly, self-interest above anyone around you, a lack of empathy/sympathy, it can be one and/or both, bluntness of character (direct people are perceived as such...I'm not going to tell you the answer). Watching 184 different fire flights, you can see who have the bluntness and the issues that they have in their

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department. Bluntness doesn't fit the "worldview" they have. It's diversity. Diversity is in the value of what lens you are using to view.

**14** Self-centered, conceited, unhelpful. Only about themselves. Uncaring. TLs do not care about shift, just themselves.

**15** How they talk to subordinates. Public or private scolding...does it in public, and demeans. Always trying to on-up the subordinate, acting smarter than subordinate. Insecure in their position/job...so they flex the bars vs leveraging relationships. Aggression and irritability. Not empathetic. Not people oriented. Doesn't take care of the team (i.e., for family issues).  
At my department, the chief is family oriented; the chief is really supportive. TLs are not a "Team 1st" leader. Time has changed how leaders interact with team. TLs don't care what the employees have going on outside work.

## Appendix G

### Coded Interview Results RQ2/IQ4

*\*\*Participant Responses Grouped by Emerging Themes That Differentiate Effective Leaders from Toxic Leaders*

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#### Effective Leaders are Extroverted and Display Emotional Intelligence

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Willing to get dirty.  
Willing to help, to work, and has a “go get ‘em” attitude.  
Helps others find solutions to problems vs saying, “go figure it out.”  
Acts with morality, is ethical, and holds self-accountable.  
Stands up to senior leaders on behalf of firefighters.  
Have a high sense of emotional intelligence.  
Have a high sense of situational awareness.  
Does not rely on bugles to get the job done.  
Demonstrates genuine care for firefighters by reaching out monthly.

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#### Effective Leaders are Charismatic, Inspirational, and Helpful

---

Willing to take extra steps to help subordinates on-/off-duty.  
There when you need them.  
Takes care of the people so they can do the job to make the organization run smooth.  
There to help give you the best chance at success.  
Helps others reach their personal and professional goals.  
Pushes others toward education or certification.  
Motivates, mentors, and molds.  
Always there for the people and the department.  
Inspire people to want to perform.  
Get the most out of their people efficiently.  
Shows empathy and willing to be a sacrificial leader.  
Motivates regularly and provides help.  
Are helpful and respectful.  
Work for the mission to relieve pressure on subordinates.  
Actually acts vs hiding and just existing.  
Gives one-on-one time to subordinates to determine needs.  
Builds a team that wants to come to work, train, and learn.  
Gets out with firefighters and engages in activities.  
Actively involved with their people.

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**Effective Leaders are Great Communicators**

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Has appropriate communication abilities.  
Talks with tact.  
Takes time to understand people and listens to feedback.  
Ability to understand and relate to people.  
Transparent and honest.  
Presents goals of the organization in a digestible manner.  
Listens to understand, not just respond.  
Has quality communication skills and follows up with genuine care.  
Can tie employee actions to the bigger picture and mission.  
Helps their personnel understand the “why” and how it ties to the organization.  
Earn employee buy-in and build relationships.

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**Effective Leaders are Humble and Sincere**

---

Runs an organization but understands that they lead people.  
Looks out for others vs just themselves.  
Doesn't try to make themselves look good in-front of higher leadership.  
Follow through with words and actions.  
Know they have more than just a title in-front of their names.  
Places the needs of the organization or individuals ahead of their own personal desires or needs.  
Takes ownership of helping others with their careers.  
Do not lead with fear and generates followers.  
Do not intimidate others.  
Professional, honest, and up-front.  
Gives quality feedback vs generic just to check a box.  
Demonstrate care and attention through body position, mannerisms, and engagement.  
Acts with non-toxic intent and attributes.  
Shows sympathy and empathy.  
Support and care for firefighters personally and professionally.

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**Effective Leaders are Accountable, Fair, Balanced, and Efficient**

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Uses situational leadership.  
Does not “let things fly” and holds employees and other accountable correctly.  
Leads people vs just managing them.  
Uses effective skillsets vs just waiting things out.  
Accounts for safety of others.  
Are consistent.  
Take account of their employees in their decisions.

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Trusts employees and does not need to check up on employees' task completion.  
Has and uses effective leadership.  
More concerned about the team members than the mission.

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**Effective Leaders are Action and Goal Focused, Results Driven, and Have Priorities and Drive**

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Put the agency first and willing to commit time to the agency.  
Hire the right people to better the agency.  
Get results.  
Use succession planning to set others up for success.  
personnel and leads professional development.  
Does not fall back Develop to the "status-quo."

## Appendix H

### RQ2/IQ5 - Summary of Participant Responses

#### Participant #1 summarized:

TLs can be effective, but they cannot be effective by intention. TLs use repercussions for effectiveness. TLs can be effective in certain situations, but all in all they are not effective. [They] normally achieve the opposite of what they want.

#### Participant #2 summarized:

The lack of accountability erodes the agency, for example, an individual at Xxxxxx was sexually harassing others but was allowed to retire. It is a double-edged sword, TLs are people to learn what not to do and do have effectiveness in a sense, but they are ineffective because their followers recreate toxicity through new toxic leaders. Some TLs are great at their job and effective but are [crappy] people.

#### Participant #3 summarized:

I had a prior leader with higher experience that was able to upgrade positions, leverage gains for the department. It was good for the agency, but he used it to leverage his position and caused a lot of disruption to the organization. He showed the ideal way not to lead. The way he went about it was a fake people/team first action model. He “wrecked some stuff” and left the agency high and dry. He had competency and knowledge, and had skills but he was a tornado the organization. TLs negatively impact trust. TLs are able to make change but at the cost of the organization. TLs will fail to make it a people based “thing.” It is more self-centered/-based and will negatively affect people that are part of changes.

#### Participant #4 summarized:

It trickles down; if a TL is at the top, it starts to trickle down into the rest of the leadership and eventually most of the leadership seems toxic. Everybody is at each other’s throats, bickering and fighting about small stuff. There just isn’t much going for the department if the leadership is toxic.

#### Participant #5 summarized:

I don’t feel toxic leaders are effective; principally, they are ineffective. They may be effective within their span of control to keep their plan moving forward. Their scope of power is small. Eventually, others will notice the TL. They won’t have the buy in to see the agency’s strategic plan through. Translating to a high attrition rate and turn over, and lack of desire to promote.

**Participant #6 summarized:**

TLs crush people's soul, motivation, and drive for those under them. We all know the fire service, in general, will get the job done, but how effectively we operate the moment you walk in the station is the question. Going to work and feeling like you're not able to breath/survive, gasp for air. When you have people who suffer under that type of leader, performance is degraded, and when we can't perform because so much is weighing on you and the leaders and managers are pressing down, you don't have an effective fire department. Basically, it's just a department that is just hanging on and it leads to mental health issues, suicides, and it affects home life. TLs negatively affect the agency and people. A toxic assistant chief and fire chief will destroy people.

**Participant #7 summarized:**

They are not all that effective. Ultimately, as a leader, when you are asked to get something done, you delegate it, and if you're a TL subordinates won't go the extra bit. A TL won't command that type of respect. It'll show in other subordinates below and around them and brings the entire department down.

**Participant #8 summarized:**

TLs may get compliance but they won't get commitment. They will get the minimum requirements, the base requirements, from their employees to keep their jobs or stay employed, but they won't go above and beyond. The "bare minimum club" exists because of toxic leaders, employees would do the bare bones minimum to maintain their job, get passing evaluations, and move forward. Anything above and beyond that, the employees weren't going to do it. TLs lack the ability to generate buy-in for the organization.

**Participant #9 summarized:**

If you look at traits, the perception is, if you look at TLs they tend to look and think old school. The sternness and discipline can be more effective vs newer generation leaders. Some of the older non-personal leaders weren't exactly toxic. The term "toxic" can be interpreted differently depending on who is looking at it. There can be solid traits associated with toxic leaders.

**Participant #10 summarized:**

Maybe, in the moment they are effective, but in the long run it is going to affect the people. It will eventually explode or fail. It will affect the firefighters below them. TLs will get results, but in the long run it will affect everyone negatively.

**Participant #11 summarized:**

It is an effect that is not genuine vs non-TLs. Meaning, you want to have a non-TL and you want to serve him, work for him, do everything in your power to satisfy that leader. With TLs, you genuinely deep down don't want to serve him because you because you don't want to. It is more of a "need" to instead of a want.

**Participant #12 summarized:**

A TL is not effective; subjectively, no, they cannot be effective. Objectively, a TL can be effective. If something is moving forward it is “effective.” However, the effectiveness comes at the cost of others (self-gaining). Their style isn’t about how to make it better for the team, it’s “me.” A TL’s effectiveness will never last, it will dwindle and diminish. TLs might be seen from the outside or from upward as an EL, however the bottom sees the truth. Those allowing the TLs to be in their position will not see the truth for a long time.

**Participant #13 summarized:**

You can be an effective leader and still be toxic. Default to Xxxxx, the perception was in a lot of cases was that he was toxic. I don’t think the department went in reverse...people may not have liked him, but he for sure made the department move forward. My promotion was because Xxxxx held the last person to the fire and he left. That created the avenue to get me promoted, it was holding an ineffective leader accountable. The environment and mechanisms may have been perceived as toxic, but it bettered the department. The old leader dragged his section into the mud. The intent wasn’t toxic, it was to move the ineffective leader where he could impact the department less. The stronger leader goes to where more firefighters need him.

**Participant #14 summarized:**

I would say they are not effective at all. In the fire service we have a job to do; we still get the job done, regardless. A TL is not effective, it turns people the wrong way, they want to leave and not come to work, or they want to find a new department. I got nauseous every time I came to work in my example. As far as effectiveness, TLs are effective to a point, but not at being a leader and effective.

**Participant #15 summarized:**

We know that TLs are primarily ineffective. I don’t believe that someone considered a TL is an ineffective leader. TLs have a dictatorship, there is time and place to be directive (e.g., life safety). A TL knows how to be very authoritative and get people to work only because of rank. Typically, in day-to-day, the “do it because I said so” does not work very well, or very often. An EL would allow people to complete work in their own way or format.

## Appendix I

### Coded Interview Results RQ2/IQ6

*Outcomes of Effective versus Toxic Leadership*

Participant	<i>EL Outcomes</i>	<i>TL Outcomes</i>
1	Willingness to complete tasks. Results closer to desired outcome. Employees want to work.	Forced completion of work tasks. Results not close to desired outcome. Employees perform minimal work.
2		Effective work on fireground only. Protégés perpetuate toxic behavior.
3	Successful customer service mission. Employee needs met and satisfied.	Failed system approaches. External customer service poor. Wrong people promoted. Internal employee needs not met.
4	Increased agency transparency. Increased agency output.	Success attributed to <i>TL</i> 's supervisor. Lower agency output or success.
5	Buy-in and transparency. Less reliance on hierarchy. Employee confidence in leader. Recognition of employee as human. Increased desire to do more.	Lack of buy-in and transparency. Increased arrogance and hierarchy. Low employee confidence in leader. Low personal interaction. Lack of employee ability realization.
6	High levels of productivity, wellness, and pride. Overall desire to be better. Fostered growth and development.	Lack of productivity, bare minimum. Employees just come to work and will have dirty trucks, dirty kitchen. Lacking or low customer service.
7	Highly effective team. High response success rate. High job/position competence.	Failed mission. Poor overall employee competence or growth. Incompetent or ignorant leadership.
8	Large employee majority buy-in. Willingness of employees to take on additional tasks or duties. More employee time/energy spent on assigned tasks.	Agency does not produce to best ability. Employees resist additional taskings. High resistance to implementation of policy and programs.
9	New generation leaders have happier employees. Increased coaching of employees.	Old generation mentality seen as toxic. Effectiveness seen in hindsight. Lack of situational leadership ability. Illegal, immoral, unethical actions.

10	Builds strong firefighters and a strong organization. Strictness with a good work environment and good morale. High rate of results and outcomes.	
11	Effective and complete work. Increased leader approachability. Employees want to work.	Tension/fear with low performance. Fear of repercussions or retaliation. Low leader effectiveness.
12	Increased results/accomplishments. Increased agency transparency.	Low performance and excuses. Low faith in leadership.
13	Increased agency soft skills. Effectiveness dependent on generation of employee.	Decreased agency soft skills. Decreased feeling of value by younger generations. Effectiveness dependent on generation of employee.
14	Employees want to come to work. Leadership is reciprocated. Protégés developed <i>EL</i> skills.	
15	High employee' need to be at work. Increased employee' buy-in. Shift that eats meals as a team. Increased expectation of leaders.	Low employee leave balances. Higher call-out/sick rates. Lower morale, bickering, infighting, and grievances.

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