
The Hidden Cost of Success: *Confronting the Rise and Risk of Toxic Leadership*

Sohail Rao, MD, MA, DPhil¹

¹HBond Foundation, 6918 Camp Bullis Road, San Antonio, TX 78246

¹Corresponding Author Email: srao@hbond.org

I have spent much of my career in institutions where leadership is revered and rightfully so. Strong leadership can ignite innovation, rally teams in crisis, and bring clarity in chaos. But over time, I have also seen the darker side. I have watched colleagues with extraordinary promise quietly leave, teams unravel under pressure, and once vibrant cultures turn cautious and cold. And too often, the common thread is a certain kind of leader: one who appears competent and charismatic on the surface, but leaves a trail of disengagement, fear, and harm in their wake.

We don't talk about toxic leadership enough, not in boardrooms, not in academia, not in medicine. But it exists. And it's not always loud. Sometimes it whispers in withheld praise, in strategic exclusion, in shifting blame and silencing dissent. Sometimes it hides behind glossy presentations and a record of deliverables. ***Toxic leadership is not always abusive in the conventional sense, but it is corrosive, slowly draining teams of trust, creativity, and courage.***

I have come to believe that toxic leaders often rise not in spite of the systems they inhabit, but because of them. When institutions prioritize results over relationships and image over integrity, they inadvertently create an environment where toxic behaviors can flourish. And when these leaders are allowed to operate unchecked, when their ability to "get things done" overshadows the wreckage they leave behind, we all pay the price.

What makes this dynamic so difficult to challenge is that toxic leaders are often skilled at managing up while managing down poorly. Their superiors see only polished outcomes; their teams experience something else entirely. In private conversations and hushed messages, team members share stories of fear, gaslighting, anxiety, and resignation, both literal and emotional. They disengage not because they don't care, but because caring has become too costly.

The hardest part is that people often don't feel safe speaking up. I've seen talented individuals hesitate to voice concerns, worried that doing so will be seen as a sign of weakness or disloyalty. Others leave silently, hoping for a healthier environment elsewhere. The loss isn't just personal; it's institutional. Every departure takes knowledge, morale, and potential with it.

So how do we begin to change this? It starts with listening, really listening, to those on the front lines, not just in exit interviews or climate surveys, but in the spaces between the coffee rooms, the side chats, the quiet sighs during meetings. We must pay attention to patterns of burnout, turnover, and silence. These are not inevitable byproducts of ambition; they're often symptoms of something far more damaging. Leadership evaluations must evolve. It's not enough to ask if a leader is effective. We must ask: How do they lead? Do

they elevate others, or only themselves? Do they cultivate a sense of safety or one of fear? Do people thrive under their leadership or merely survive?

I have also learned that holding toxic leaders accountable requires more than policy; it requires will. It takes courage to challenge someone who appears successful. But ignoring toxic behavior because “they get results” is a short-term calculation with long-term consequences. It sends a message that outcomes matter more than people. And once that message takes root, it spreads.

Can toxic leaders change? Maybe. But change is complex and rare. True transformation requires humility, introspection, and often external help. It can't be imposed; it must be chosen. And even then, it must be monitored and reinforced. Too often, institutions place the burden of change on those harmed, rather than those causing harm. Still, I remain hopeful. I have seen teams bounce back. I have seen leaders evolve when given the right support and accountability. But more often, I have seen real healing begin only after the toxic presence is removed. It's a reminder that while compassion is critical, protection is essential.

At the end of the day, leadership is a privilege, not a weapon. It is not about control, but stewardship. It is the quiet, consistent work of building people up, not breaking them down. And if we are serious about shaping the future of medicine, education, business, or any field, we must be just as serious about the quality of those we entrust to lead. We must stop making excuses for toxic leadership. Stop mistaking fear for respect. Stop assuming that silence means satisfaction. We owe it to our teams, our missions, and ourselves to create cultures where dignity is non-negotiable, where well-being matters, and where leadership is measured not just in achievements, but in the lives it touches.

Leadership isn't about being right. It's about doing right. And that begins with listening to those who have the least power, the quietest voices, and the most to lose.

About the Editor:

Sohail Rao, MD, MA, DPhil, is a physician-scientist and academic leader with extensive experience in medical education, biomedical research, and institutional development. He has held senior leadership positions across academic health centers in the United States and internationally. Dr. Rao is deeply committed to advancing ethical leadership and fostering a culture of accountability and psychological safety in academic medicine.