

Book Review

Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership

By: Alma C. Ortega

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Book Review

In context of defining leadership not only in general but also in terms of academic institutions there are in excess of 100 leadership definitions (Riggs, 2001). Although, in leadership literature, it is dominant to focus on the positive side of leadership, there is a growing literature emphasizing that leadership and management may not always be associated with “good” (Cohen, 2018). In this sense, discussing academic libraries and toxic leadership -both of which are overshadowed- in context of leadership in academic institutions should be taken into consideration more.

Alma C. Ortega (2017), based on research (produced from her doctoral dissertation), discussed that librarianship and academic librarianship in a special sense are not included even in informal

literature such as an academic or personal blog. In the preface, the author further explains this as follows:

Academic libraries as part of a university or college are seen as a piece of the puzzle of higher education, but they are really never thought about (unless it is accreditation time). They are not in the consciousness of most administrators, or even of most students (p. vii).

In addition to this, the author describes her work as “courageous” work. In my opinion, it can be described as “courageous” considering that it covers a dynamic, but a previously ignored subject and it draws attention to destructive-toxic leadership behaviors in these structures contrary to the positive-constructive leadership phenomenon in common literature. One of the strengths of this book is that Alma C. Ortega is a librarian herself and knowledgeable about librarianship, library management, library staff, and the perspectives of libraries, and the existing situation is reflected by someone within this field.

They know the academic library as a service, they call anyone inside the library building a librarian. Many of them do not know a master’s degree is needed to become a librarian; much less do they know that many of these librarians are faculty members at their institutions. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that they have no idea of (or interest in) how an academic library is managed, much less led (p.vii).

It is clear that the organization of the book offers logical integrity and readability in terms of presenting the problem, the role of the author as a researcher, literature review, transition from an overview of leadership to the problem at hand, and toxic leadership correlation. In the first chapter of the book, which consists of 6 chapters in total, the questions of “What is leadership?” and “What is toxic leadership?” are attempted to be answered with an academic style by providing



references to the literature. In this chapter, it is emphasized that there are only a few research carried out on the subject of library and information studies, and, critically, leadership is seen as a positive phenomenon.

In the second chapter, the author focuses on how to recognize a toxic leader and its destructive effects on the library (service, atmosphere, staff).

Toxic leadership requires egregious actions taken against some or all of the members, even among peers, of the organization a leader heads; actions that cause considerable and long-lasting damage to individuals and the organization that often continue even after the perpetrator has left the organization (p.6).

In addition, the author provides guidance on what situations actions cannot be regarded as toxic leadership behavior even when they are similar (toxic-like) behaviors (p. 23).

Toxic leadership includes egregious actions of any kind including but is not limited to: demeaning, shunning ignoring, bullying, mobbing, gas-lighting, overworking, backbiting, berating, among others. Librarians must remain vigilant to see if these behaviors are happening to any of their colleagues or themselves. Sometimes it can be confusing to figure out if a supervisor is actually a toxic leader (p. 22-23).

I think the table (Table 2.2, p.23) presented by the author is more than useful. This is because there are no specific patterns of behavior to identify a leader as toxic. Thus, it is quite difficult to easily describe toxic leaders in the context of the behaviors put forward. For example, as Reed (2004) points out, every leader who speaks loudly, is determined and demanding is not necessarily a toxic leader. Sometimes, leaders who seem soft and sincere can be toxic, too.

In the third chapter, ways to deal with a toxic leader and his/her behaviors, whom to talk to in these situations, who remain inactive in the presence of the toxic behaviors of the leader, the consequences of being inactive against toxic leader behaviors and the reasons for abiding by a toxic leader are discussed.

I can't go anywhere else really. My family is all here, in the area. Withstanding my boss would be harder if I did not have them near me (p. 34). (Conformers)

In this sense, it is seen that participants display similar behaviors as defined in the "colluders and conformers" group of "susceptible followers" category in the toxic triangle suggested by Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser (2007).

If you were one of his cronies you were treated quite well, you basically could come and go as you pleased, you could not do your job particularly well and you'd still get very high recommendations and good raises (p. 35). (Colluders)

In the fourth chapter, *Regaining the Control of the Library*, the importance of sustaining a toxic leader-free library is discussed. This is because the situation will not change for the better once the toxic leader or immediate threat is removed or isolated. Thus, the author offers to establish mechanisms to prevent the emergence of another toxic leader. It is emphasized that, otherwise, the recently resolved situation may recur soon.

The author has modeled the fifth chapter of the book as the healing process of the library without the toxic leader by suggesting that the effect of toxic leadership may be stronger than expected. If the toxic effect created by the toxic leader is not cleared in a healthy recovery period, it is suggested that a toxic leader may recur, or a resident-chronic toxic atmosphere may be created within the organization.



The last chapter of the book focuses on the embodiment of the toxic leadership phenomenon through four case studies. In this regard, the author attempts to present the toxic leader behaviors to the readers in the context of daily life and by embodying these behaviors.

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