



# “Holding the Line...on Toxic Leadership”

Actual case studies for navigating the sometimes not-so-bright line defining senior official misconduct

## What’s the #1 IG complaint topic? Toxic Leadership.

No one **strives** to be a toxic leader but toxic traits sometimes develop as a by-product of success. Studies have found success may drive a sense of self-preoccupation; afford privileged access to information, people, and objects; and/or provide unrestrained control of organizational resources.

**Two primary standards apply**—DoD 5500.7-R, *Joint Ethics Regulation*, Sec 4, 12-401, Primary Ethical Values, mandating *fairness, caring, and respect* between DoD employees, and AFI 1-2, *Commander’s Responsibilities*, para 3.2, requiring commanders to establish a *healthy climate that ensures members are treated with dignity, respect, and inclusion*. A key factor is whether subordinates are treated with “dignity and respect.” The three cases below illustrate a *not substantiated* finding (“holding the line”), a *substantiated* finding (“crossing the line”), and one that could fall somewhere in the middle (“walking a fine line”).

### The Cases:

**1 - HOLDING THE LINE:** A general officer’s leadership style elicited two distinct perceptions split along the lines of those working directly for her and those who did not:

*She challenges people vs. she attacks people*  
*She’s direct and doesn’t sugar-coat vs. she’s a bully, condescending and confrontational*  
*She always lets you know she’s in charge vs. she insults people, makes them feel stupid*  
*She is loud, but her tone is passionate vs. she yells a lot and her tone is angry*

*IG Finding:* The experienced staff members accepted the general’s methods as a means to get superior results; those less familiar with working for a senior officer saw only negative, aggressive behavior. The subjectivity of the latter group’s perceptions did not rise to a level of violation from the perspective of a reasonable and objective person. The general’s approach, though not appreciated by some, rationally related to legitimate leadership and the mission. Failure to treat subordinates with dignity and respect? **NOT SUBSTANTIATED**

**FROM THE FIELD: Does every senior official complaint result in a formal investigation?**

Every complaint is thoroughly reviewed and vetted during our intake process to determine if it contains a credible allegation of wrongdoing. Historically, about 2/3s of our complaints are resolved during intake, and about 1/3 result in a formal investigation.

**2 - CROSSING THE LINE:** An SES’s questionable conduct was reported by an inspection team. The investigation gathered consistent testimony showing the SES:

*Directed abusive and profane language at staff*  
*Had frequent temper tantrums, threw objects at people*  
*Referred to staff as well-trained animals; called them “idiots;” made public threats to fire them*  
*Instilled fear to create an environment that resulted in emotional harm to staff*

*IG Finding:* Rather than leading his unit, the SES bullied and intimidated members into submission through a well-established pattern of verbally abusive and threatening behavior. He was so focused on mission accomplishment, the toll on his staff’s well-being was of no consequence to him. Failure to treat subordinates with dignity and respect? **SUBSTANTIATED**

**3 - WALKING A FINE LINE:** An ARC general officer, concerned about a member, requested personal records protected by confidentiality. Upon being advised his access was not authorized, the general believed his authority was being challenged, lost his temper, berated the individual who refused access to the records, and threatened disciplinary action.

*IG Finding:* Is there a difference between an isolated occurrence, as in this case, and a pattern of behavior, as noted in the second case? While this incident may not have reflected the conduct to which the Air Force aspires for its senior leaders, the finding here weighed the totality of the circumstances and found the general’s conduct did not rise to the level of failing to treat subordinates with dignity and respect. **NOT SUBSTANTIATED.**

**Recognizing a subordinate toxic leader.** Consider “how” subordinate leaders are accomplishing the mission. If you see or suspect toxic leadership, Secretary Mattis’ 13 Aug 18 memo on Discipline and Lethality provides as follows: “Time, inconvenience, or administrative burdens are no excuse for allowing substandard conduct to persist.” ‘Malignant behavior must be appropriately condemned and eradicated from our ranks.’

**We also commend this article on the topic:** Narcissism and Toxic Leaders, *Military Review*, January-February 2013, by LTC (ret) Joe Doty. <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a576059.pdf>

**“Do not permit your passion for excellence to destroy your compassion for subordinates.” Secretary Mattis**  
If you have any ethics-related questions, contact your servicing SJA or local ethics officer!