

A Glance at Toxic Leadership

Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2012, p. 7). Throughout history time and time again, a country will experience the effect of a leader, but what characterizes a “toxic” leader from a “nontoxic” leader? According to Lipman-Blumen (2005a), toxic leaders come in all shapes and sizes. The common features of what categorizes a toxic leader from a nontoxic leader are specific behavioral patterns and traits. These attributes include, but are not limited to lack of integrity, outsized ambition for glory over others, egotism, and holding tight to power by undermining potential successors. Toxic leaders are individuals that use their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personality qualities (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b) to generate a stern and lasting pestilential effect on individuals within a society.

Where nontoxic leaders have noble visions, toxic leaders offer grand illusions (Lipman-Blumen, 2006, p. 54) along with promises that are usually unfeasible. Toxic leaders come to light when followers believe the individual is a godlike rescuer that going to come and make the changes they have wanted needed. Even though charisma is recognized as a trait of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2012, p. 164) it can also be used to manipulate followers. Individuals will often look up to people that are outgoing or eloquent speakers, thus putting themselves (the leaders) at the center of attention. As stated by Lipman-Blumen (2005b), many of us want leaders who project a force of certainty; whether it is real or imagined that we do not have within us. Toxic leaders often use the media as a source of propaganda to promote their ideas, affirming that it is for the greater good of the state. A prominent, but widely known toxic leader that paved the way for China was Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung). Mao believed that the only way to achieve peace was through violence. Through violence and trepidation similar to

Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, Mao eliminated traditional Chinese culture, customs, thoughts, and habits through abolishing counter-revolutionary members (Bridgham, 1967) of the Communist Party all while improving his cult of personality. Before his rise to power, his middle class peasantry backstory established his credibility and trust to the people of China. Without a doubt, Mao Zedong changed the course of history for all nations to learn from and shaped and influenced modern day China.

The Influence of Mao Zedong

Mao Zedong, also known as Chairman Mao, was a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party and the originator of China's Communist revolution. After attaining victory against the Nationalists (Yu, 1983), he founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. A number of socialist policies he implemented failed and caused the people of China to suffer severely. Mao's initial goal was to eliminate class differences and advance China (Yu, 1983). On the surface, this idea sounds great, but the way Chairman Mao handled executing this strategy did not surface in a way most people would think about eradicating the social classes. He became concerned with the future of his country after the failure of the 1911 revolution. After reading numerous works from Western culture, he was convinced that the only way to bring change to China was through military practices (Zhihua & Xia, 2011). Mao believed that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (Yu, 1983). Fascinated by the ideology of communism and works of Karl Marx, Mao's cult of personality led to him manipulating society by using coercive power. Coercive power as mentioned in Northouse (2012, p. 10) is developed from having the capacity to penalize or punish others. Movements such as The Great Leap Forward and the Hundred Flowers campaign are representations of Mao's authoritarian techniques in the wake of

the Cultural Revolution with over “40 million deaths” (Bridgham, 1967). While he is viewed as being a toxic leader, his egalitarian viewpoint on women proved otherwise.

A Positive Impact On Women

Mao believed that women (Zhihua & Xia, 2011) “held up half the heavens.” He also removed the traditional foot binding and outlawed prostitution. Although he did not support birth control, (Dong & Gao, 2014) he did encourage women to be equal to men by promoting the enforcement of Marriage Law of 1950. Mao also advocated protecting the interests of the youth, women, and children (Zhihua & Xia, 2011) in order to participate on an equal footing in all work useful to the war effort and to social progress. Although the underlying reason he was advocating for the continuing of education was for “the country,” it can be viewed as maintaining personal gain and a distraction from the millions of people that ultimately died. His equal views towards women may be attributed by the relationship he had with his mother. Despite this positive aspect, Mao purposely created chaos in order to weaken the opposition and manipulate the people of China (Zhihua & Xia, 2011) by making sure China was not consumed in a capitalist way of life. His way of educating peasants was not a form of free thinking, rather he wanted them to be educated on why capitalism was wrong and communism was right. The goal of education is transparency of all perspectives, yet Mao only wanted his country under communism. The Cultural Revolution was Mao’s fundamental way of making sure he was at the forefront of authority. The systems he used authenticated that he was in control.

The Methods of Mao Zedong

Mao Zedong tormented those that spoke out against him and authorized that nearly 800 million copies of his “Little Red Book” to be printed with strict guidelines (Dong & Gao, 2014) for social interaction. He incited Red Guards to destroy past culture so he could have complete

control over China's culture. This was an exact replica of what Adolf Hitler did while exterminating the Jewish race in Germany and almost all of Europe because he did not want his followers to be informed or think differently than him. In this case, Mao was afraid of being overthrown and questioned by someone who was more intellectual than he was. Mao's repeated political campaigns interrupted farm and factory work for weeks and months at a time, while he insisted on putting "politics in command" (Xizhe, 2015) meant that economic resources were often wasted. The Great Leap Forward was Mao's attempt to transform China into a force to be reckoned with. Its failure would lessen the power Mao had on the communist party and China, which led to his downfall and power struggle. After the Korean War, Three and Five-Anti campaigns were launched to raise money and increase support of the war. People held fundraising events for soldiers and created posters depicting the army as heroic. By viewing this propaganda, the goal was to increase morale within the homes of followers. As mentioned by Xizhe (2015) the purpose for Three and Five Anti campaigns were to eliminate corruption, bureaucracy, and fraud among industrialists and the government itself, thus Mao targeted political opponents with the purpose of consolidating his power. He was motivated to regain control an authority with the Cultural Revolution.

Mao's Hundred Flowers and Anti-Rightist campaigns were used as tools to as a means to eliminate his enemies through people power. In 1953, the government collectivized agriculture. Intellectuals began to denounce the government's faulty economic policies. Mao was now faced with the new elite and intellectuals giving their opinions (Xizhe, 2015) on what him and his officials should do. Mao then encouraged his followers to constructively criticize the government in a speech. The Hundred Flower Campaign in 1956 went on longer than what Mao originally wanted. The criticisms turned more aggressive and what blossomed from this was the Anti

Rightist movement. This movement accentuated that those rightists intellectuals be punished, personal scores be settled, and instilling fear (Bridgham, 1967) in the people to speak out against the government.

In July 1955, Mao called for a “speeding up” (Xizhe, 2015) of the collectivization of agriculture, and nationalized industry. People were encouraged to produce steel in small-scale operations by collecting scrap steel and melting it together in backyard furnaces. This concept was conjectured to make China a global influence in a matter of 15 years. As mentioned before, the use of propaganda through uplifting music and banners pushed people to work. What Mao failed to consider was the level of experience the workers had. Instead of producing industrial-grade steel, peasants with lack of knowledge or expertise (Dong & Gao, 2014) ended up with useless steel.

With the growth of mass industry, there were limited people to work in the fields, which led to the worst famine in history. This famine led to a conference at Lushan. While at this conference. As said by (Zhihua & Xia, 2011) Defense Secretary Marshal Peng Dehuai expressed his doubts of the Great Leap Forward in a letter to Mao. Mao did not listen to his recommendations and replaced Peng with Marshal Lin Biao while continuing to move forward with the Great Leap Forward. Through this particular action of continuing to move forth, despite half of China’s population dying rather than thriving proves his autocratic leadership style was only productive for a short term (Lumsden, Lumsden, & Wiethoff, 2009, p. 260). What is ironic is that Mao openly knew that he was letting people in his country go hungry (Wilson, 1995), while he had gourmet meals and lived a life of extravagance. The mentality he had of having what others could not reassured that he was superior over others.

Autocratic leadership (used interchangeably with authoritarian) is characterized by individual control over all decisions and little input from group members (Van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, & De Cremer, 2004). Autocratic leaders typically make choices based on their judgment and rarely accept advice from followers. Since Mao opposed capitalism, he would speak on behalf of convincing the Chinese that what they were doing was in favor of China. While promoting the build China into a “superpower” philosophy, this motivated the followers to think they were making a difference. Authoritarian leaders often influence their followers by (Lipman-Blumen, 2006, p. 100) exercising power against groups whom the followers dislike, fear, or envy. In the situation of choosing to not listen to Defense Secretary Marshal Peng Dehuai, Mao allowed over ten million people die from 1958 to 1962.

As Mao’s followers started to see that their population was dying out, two political leaders Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping stepped up to Mao to establish a form of stability and reform. When this occurred Mao lost his title of Chairman and Liu Shaoqi ceded him. Soon after this happened, this motivated Mao to regain power and take back what was his in 1966. Wilson (1995) declares that the reformation of China resulted in the mobilization of previously excluded societal groups into the political process. This reformation resulted the declining ability of the state to control resources that precipitated a shift in the balance of power (Xizhe, 2015) between the state and those affiliated with the reform process. To highlight what caused Mao Zedong to have a “aha” moment when wanting to build a movement he believed in, there were external forces that were the cause of how he came into power.

Mao Zedong’s Background

Born to a middle-class peasant family in central Hunan Province (Wilson, 1995), Mao Zedong was exposed to his father’s authoritarian mannerisms, but loved his mother’s nurturing

temperament. As mentioned in lecture on what causes an individual to become a toxic leader, a precursor for Mao's desire for gaining control was the little control his father allowed him to have, which forced Mao to rebel. Growing up in an unstable environment such as one parent terrorizing and asserting more dominance than the other, can come with the repercussions of repressed memories and questioning one's self worth. Mao's family had inherited three acres of land that had been in the family for several generations. As said by Zhihua & Xia (2011) Mao's father was a prosperous grain dealer. Mao attended a small school in his village, yet received little education. By age 13, he was working full time in fields and became restless. At age 14, Mao's father had arranged a marriage for him, (Wilson, 1995) but he declined.

Mao's military background with the Revolutionary Army and the Kuomintang is also noteworthy when describing his tactics and strategy for improving China. A pivotal moment that sparked his desire even more was when the Kuomintang overthrew the monarchy in 1912 Zhihua & Xia (2011) and founded the Republic of China. The political and cultural changes were essentially his motivation. During the 1920s, the Russian Revolution that established the former Soviet Union intrigued Mao. In terms of speculating, these various acts constructed resentment towards his father and the toxic leader Mao became. It is said that Mao craved affection and acclaim (Dong & Gao, 2014). Scholars (Wilson, 1995) note that he did not take personal care in his hygiene and would sleep with younger women while married. Even though he technically outlawed prostitution, he still partook in the act himself because he considered himself "above" the laws he instituted. The bigger question is how is Chairman Mao Zedong still branded in the year 2017 and what have historians, scholars, and individuals learned from what Chairman Mao created.

Post Mao Zedong Era

Mao Zedong manipulated the system exceptionally well. His falsifications displayed his arrogance, inept capacity to love anyone but himself, and boisterous loyalty towards communism that infected China like wildfire. People adhered to him because they were scared of the consequences he might inflict upon them through guerilla warfare. His followers respected authority, defended his beliefs, and reinforced his perspectives that still affect China in present day. Dong & Gao (2014) make reference to how Mao Zedong is responsible for the most deaths in history compared to Hitler and Stalin. This information alone would resonate fear within anyone to not want to resist or speak about change, which is why intellectuals were silenced or executed. Though his tactic was considered one of failure, he is still idolized by a majority of Chinese, but not the entire world. Posters of him still remain throughout the country as well as his portrait displayed on the 100-yuan banknote. Reflecting on this notion, in the United States we have leaders on forms of currency that both portray nontoxic and toxic leadership. Take for example Thomas Jefferson; he owned slaves, yet is on the nickel and two dollar bill.

In sum, followers must be cognizant of the ethical values and traits that leaders introduce. Without bringing up current affairs that are currently happening in the United States, the positive impact of a toxic leader is that more people become informed and motivated to speak out against what is right and wrong. In addition, America is in the opposite state of what Mao Zedong would have wanted and was advocating against: capitalism. Once people are able to determine the differences between a toxic and nontoxic leader, history will not be meant to repeat itself. Mao Zedong may be seen as a hero to some, but to the world he was a pervasive killer, master of conspiracy, and brilliant dictator.