

# **Identifying, Understanding, and Handling Bad, Ineffective, and Toxic Leaders and Followers**

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*Leadership development has long been a focus within businesses, governments and the military. During the past several decades, leadership development has expanded to all levels of schooling and personal growth. Many articles, books, blogs, and podcasts address poor leadership and followership and the associated characteristics and consequences. Yet, there currently is not a standard lexicon to describe and differentiate among the various types. The present paper offers a framework that can be applied to understand issues that contribute to poor leadership and followership, considering, Character, Competence, Context, Communication (Four C Elements). Additionally, poor leaders and followers can be categorized into three different groups – Bad, Ineffective, Toxic (BIT). Identifying the relevant BIT category and Four C Elements is the first step to address difficult individuals and situations. The next step is determining how to deal with these BIT leaders or followers. These specific classifications will help leaders and followers find the best way to handle BIT leaders and followers.*

*Keywords: leadership, followership, bad, ineffective, toxic leadership, bad, ineffective, toxic followership*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership development has long been a focus within businesses, governments and the military. During the past several decades, leadership development has expanded to all levels of schooling and personal growth. There are countless articles, books, websites, podcasts, lectures, workshops, interviews, stories, films, and opinions regarding characteristics of leaders – including those who are admirable and effective and those who are not. Unfortunately, there are far too many leaders who are not to be admired and not to be modeled, including people in: businesses, governments, the military, schools, religious groups, social clubs, and families. Additionally, there are many followers or team members who also are not to be admired and not to be modeled. Studying who to model is valuable; studying who not to model also is valuable. The present paper focuses on the leaders and followers who are not to be modeled.

There are, of course, many differences among this undesirable group of poor leaders and followers. Yet, there currently is not a standard lexicon to describe and differentiate among the various types. The present paper offers a way to classify issues within various types of poor leaders and followers. Additionally, poor leaders and followers can be categorized into three different groups – Bad, Ineffective, Toxic. These classifications may help to understand, cope with, and avoid being poor leaders and followers.

## **IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES WITH POOR LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS**

In addition to identifying different types of poor leaders and followers, it is valuable to consider what exactly contributes to excellent or poor leadership and followership and where it psychosocially occurs. Frameworks are useful to help understand, distinguish, categorize, and apply ideas. A recent framework developed to assess and guide the education and development of individuals as effective, adaptive leaders and followers is based on Four C Elements – Character, Competence, Context, Communication – that operate across four psychosocial levels – Personal, Interpersonal, Team, Organizational (Barry & Grunberg, 2020; Callahan & Grunberg, 2019; Grunberg et al., 2018; P. A. Price, 2004). **Character** (Ch) refers to “who” each person is (including demographics, personality, values). **Competence** (Cp) is “what” each person knows and does and includes role specific knowledge, skills, and actions and transcendent knowledge, skills, and actions (including critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution). **Context** (Cx) refers to “where and when,” including physical environment outside each person (e.g., weather, time of day, physical surroundings), physical environment within each person (e.g., hunger, thirst, tiredness), psychosocial environment (including numbers and types of people, cultures, organizations), and stress. **Communication** (Cm) refers to “how individuals interact with each other” which includes verbal (written and oral) and non-verbal (body language, gestures, facial expressions) information that is both sent as well as received. These Four C Elements also can be used to describe and understand poor leadership and followership and can help thereby help guide improvements in these individuals. With regard to the four psychosocial levels, **Personal** refers to the individual leader or follower. **Interpersonal** refers to dyadic relationships, such as leader-follower, supervisor-supervisee, teacher-learner, peer-peer. **Team** refers to a small group of people with complementary skills who are mutually committed to common goals. **Organizational** refers to large groups, institutions, and systems.

It is important for a leader or follower to be able to identify why the issue is occurring in order to fix the problem. This framework can be used to identify the specific areas that are causing the issues with leaders and/or followers. Applying this framework will help in next steps to determine how to address or solve the issue(s).

## **IDENTIFYING BAD, INEFFECTIVE, OR TOXIC (BIT) LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS**

BIT is an acronym for: Bad, Ineffective, Toxic. BIT also is a word that means small in amount, which makes it easy to remember as describing the “small” or weak pole of leadership and followership. Although the word “toxic” has been frequently used with regard to weak or poor leaders and followers (Asghar, 2014; Disque, 2018; Goldman, 2009; Offermann, 2004; Reed, 2015; Thomas, Gentzler, & Salvatorelli, 2016), it is not a complete description of how and why leaders and followers can be poor or terrible. Generalizations about “toxic” leadership imply that the leader purposely creates a negative environment but does not fully explain who can contribute to this type of situation and only begins to address how best to deal with different types of poor leaders and followers (Goldman, 2009; Kellerman, 2004; Reed, 2015; Sutton, 2007; Whicker, 1996). BIT describes distinctions among poor leaders and poor followers that are useful to analyze challenging workplace situations and to determine how best to improve them by identifying, understanding, and addressing the three major types of poor leaders and poor followers. We have found that this acronym and its classifications help learners understand, cope

with, and avoid being poor leaders and followers. It is important to note that the three BIT categories can be intentional or unintentional, with or without self-awareness.

### **Bad Leaders and Followers**

Bad (B) leaders and followers: (1) refer to individuals who advocate evil or malicious actions, beliefs, or attitudes; (2) may involve immorality, unethical values and behaviors; (3) may result from altered perceptions of reality because of mental health problems or psychologically-altering substance use. Bad leaders and followers (i.e., immoral, evil) are, fortunately, rare; unfortunately, they do occur in political roles, cults, gangs, social settings, workplaces, and families. Bad leaders become dangerously influential when they have bad or supportive followers. Any group also can have bad followers who undermine the group's mission, performance, cohesiveness, morale. Morally and ethically bad leaders and followers are sometimes described as lacking in Character (e.g., values, attitudes, integrity, accountability, trustworthiness).

### **Ineffective Leaders and Followers**

Ineffective (I) leaders and followers: (1) refer to individuals who are not effectively contributing to a team; (2) may result from lack of relevant knowledge and skills; (3) may result from lack of self and/or social awareness; (4) may result from absence (psychological or physical); (5) may result from weakness (psychological or lack of influence). Ineffective leaders and followers (i.e., cannot or do not perform their roles effectively) are, perhaps, the most common type of poor leaders and followers. They may lack the necessary knowledge and skills to set vision, inspire others, to provide resources necessary for group success, to remove barriers and obstacles that interfere with success. Alternatively, ineffective leaders may have necessary knowledge and skills but be physically or psychologically absent and, therefore, they cannot be effective. Followers similarly can be ineffective. These limitations can be described as lacking Competence either in role specific knowledge and skills or in transcendent knowledge and skills (e.g., critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution). They also can result from poor Communication (sending and/or receiving information) and inability or unwillingness to adapt to Context.

### **Toxic Leaders and Followers**

Toxic (T) leaders and followers: (1) refer to individuals who contribute negative attitudes and/or behaviors; (2) may involve individuals who are self-aware or not of their effect on others. Toxic leaders and followers refer to individuals who act as toxins (as in poisons) to create toxic environments for others. This toxicity can arise because the individuals are rude, disrespectful, exploitive, unkind, selfish, and so on. Toxicity also results from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age, sex, gender identity, religion, culture, etc. However, there is another, not as obvious way individuals can be toxic to others. Specifically, one can create a toxic environment with a group (especially a leader) by playing favorites within a group or team, spending more time with the favorites, being available more to the favorites with regard to time and openness to ideas, publicly sharing "inside" jokes and stories. The toxic individual can be the nicest, most competent, friendly, and well-meaning person, but apparent favoritism can undermine the group's performance, cohesiveness, and morale. This type of BIT leader and follower can be considered as a problem with Context (i.e., types of psychosocial interactions in this instance) or Communication.

Similar to the framework described above to identify specific elements where issues are occurring, distinguishing among bad, ineffective, and toxic will add additional information to help find ways to address or solve the issue(s). The BIT classification can be used to identify the specific type of leader or follower that is causing the issue(s). Applying this classification, along with the Four C Elements will help in the next steps to determine how to address or solve the issue(s).

## CLASSIFYING BIT AND FOUR C ELEMENTS FROM EXAMPLES

The dominant classifications based on the Four C Elements and BIT are provided in examples below followed by a discussion of how to use this information to address or alleviate these various challenges and problems (See Tables 1 through 5). All of the examples of poor leadership and poor followership can apply to all four psychosocial levels (PITO) depending on context. The BIT classification and Four C Elements can be used to determine what should be the focus to help the individuals develop into effective leaders and followers. This same strategy can be used in self-assessments or after receiving feedback from peers, supervisors, or subordinates about our own areas for growth and development. These examples are drawn from an Internet search of “Poor Leadership” and “Poor Followership.” The reported words, phrases, or descriptions are listed and then classified with regard to the most dominant BIT and Four C Elements.

**TABLE 1  
LAMARCO (2019) PRESENTS SIGNS OF POOR LEADERSHIP**

<b>Poor Leadership Elements</b>	<b>Dominant BIT classification</b>	<b>Dominant Four C Element</b>
Will not listen	I	Cm
Micromanages	I	Cp
Has no vision	I	Cp
No clear expectations for employees	I	Cp
Has favorites	T	Ch
Is a bully	T	Ch

**TABLE 2  
MYATT (2012) PRESENTS WAYS TO IDENTIFY POOR LEADERS**

<b>Poor Leadership Elements</b>	<b>Dominant BIT classification</b>	<b>Dominant Four C Element</b>
Lack vision, cannot inspire teams, motivate performance, or create sustainable value	I	Cp
Lack character or integrity	B	Ch
Lack performance	I	Cp
Is a know-it-all	I	Ch
Poor communication skills	I	Cm
Self-centered	B	Ch
Not fluid or flexible	I	Ch
Lack focus	I	Ch
Avoid change or innovation	I	Ch
Does not pay attention to consumers	I	Cm
Not invested in followers	I	Ch
Not accountable	I	Ch
Fail to create culture	I	Cx
Lack courage	B	Ch

**TABLE 3**  
**CATAPULT GROUPS (2018) LIST OF WARNING SIGNS OF POOR LEADERSHIP**

<b>Poor Leadership Elements</b>	<b>Dominant BIT classification</b>	<b>Dominant Four C Element</b>
Bullying	T	Ch
Focusing on mistakes	T	Ch
Lack of communication	I	Cm
Isolation	I	Cp
Micromanaging	I	Cp
Inability to motivate team	I	Cp
Continuously altering direction or strategy without explanation	I	Cp
Not accepting responsibility	I	Ch
Favoring some employees over others	T	Ch

**TABLE 4**  
**MCCALLUM (2013) DISCUSSES QUALITIES OF POOR FOLLOWERS**

<b>Poor Followership Elements</b>	<b>Dominant BIT classification</b>	<b>Dominant Four C Element</b>
Judgment	I	Cp
Work ethic	I	Ch
Competence	I	Cp
Honesty	B	Ch
Courage	I	Ch
Discretion	I	Ch
Loyalty	T	Ch
Ego management	I	Ch

**TABLE 5**  
**GIARDINO (2019) PROVIDES QUALITIES THAT POOR FOLLOWERS LACK**

<b>Poor Followership Elements</b>	<b>Dominant BIT classification</b>	<b>Dominant Four C Element</b>
Not self-directed	I	Ch
Lack courage	I	Ch
Lack loyalty	T	Ch
Lack judgment	I	Cp
Not engaged	I	Ch

From these five examples, you can see the various qualities that make up poor leaders and followers and the disparate descriptions. There are many more examples of poor leadership (e.g., Beaumont, 2017; Business Training Experts, n.d.; Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness, n.d.; Gregory, 2018; H. Price, n.d.) and followership (e.g., Asghar, 2014; Disque, 2018; Offermann, 2004; Thomas et al., 2016) within the literature. We encourage you to read different articles and make your own classifications to help you identify the issues. From here, you can identify the issues within your own team, workplace, organization and move towards ways to deal with and/or fix the problems.

### **I’VE IDENTIFIED THE ISSUES, NOW WHAT?**

Identifying the relevant BIT category and Four C Elements is the first step to address difficult individuals and situations. The next step is determining how to deal with these BIT leaders or followers.

These specific classifications will help leaders and followers find the best way to handle BIT leaders and followers.

Bad leaders and followers who are purposeful in their actions should be removed from the team/organization or avoided. Those Bad leaders and followers who are not purposeful in their actions might benefit from referral to behavioral health professionals or other counselors (e.g., to treat mental health, substance abuse, or serious life-stress issues).

Ineffective leaders and followers who are aware of their limitations and/or reasons for their ineffectiveness and are open to learn, change, grow, should participate in relevant education and development programs or executive coaching (e.g., regarding organizational skills, effective communication, technical training relevant to the jobs, relationship and team building). For those Ineffective leaders and followers who are not aware of their limitations and/or reasons for their ineffectiveness and are open to learn, change, grow, should first be guided to increase awareness of the reasons for their ineffectiveness and then channeled into appropriate programs or coaching. Both of these types of Ineffective leaders and followers can learn to become more self-aware as well as socially aware and make the necessary changes to grow as a leader or follower. Ineffective leaders or followers who are not open to learn, change, grow in accordance with their limitations should be shifted to roles that better align with their abilities or removed from the team/organization.

Toxic leaders and followers who are aware of how they are contributing to or creating toxic environments and are open to learn, change, grow, should participate in relevant education and development programs or coaching. Toxic leaders and followers who are not aware of how they are contributing to or creating toxic environments and are open to learn, change, grow, should first be guided to increased awareness of how they are making environments toxic and then channeled into appropriate programs or coaching. Similar to Ineffective leaders and followers open to learn, increasing their self- and social awareness of the issues should help them develop as better leaders and followers. Toxic leaders and followers who are not open to learning, changing, and growing in accordance with their limitations may need to be removed from the team/organization.

Identifying the relevant Four C Elements will indicate which elements should be the focus of education and development programs and coaching for the leaders and followers willing to participate and grow. Identification of the relevant psychosocial levels also will help focus the education and development programs and coaching. Much of the improvements within the Four C Elements falls under the umbrella of emotional intelligence, which is essential to leader development (Goleman, 1995, 1998, 2011, 2019).

Goleman identifies four quadrants of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, social-awareness, social regulation (Goleman, 1998). Self-awareness entails understanding one's own behaviors, cognitions, motivations and emotions. Self-regulation focuses on self-control and adaptability to various situations and settings. Social awareness involves understanding others' behaviors, cognitions, motivations and emotions. Social regulation applies the components of emotional intelligence to optimize collaboration and cooperation and attainment of mutual goals with other people. Growth in these four quadrants of emotional intelligence aligns with awareness and growth through the four psychosocial levels (Personal, Interpersonal, Team, Organizational). The Four C Elements help to guide this growth.

Having this self and social awareness and regulation allows leaders and followers to improve awareness, regulation, knowledge, and skills within the Four C Elements. Additionally, it will help you to avoid becoming a BIT leader or follower and be better members of a team.

## **CONCLUSION**

Too often we run into poor leaders and followers. The present paper offers a way to distinguish among several different types of poor leaders and followers: Bad, Ineffective, Toxic (BIT). Identifying which BIT type we're facing is useful to figure out how best to deal with those individuals and the situation. Identifying the Four C Elements (Character, Competence, Context, Communication) add

additional information to help guide remedies. These classifications also may help to understand, cope with, and avoid being poor leaders and followers ourselves.

### Disclaimer

The opinions and assertions contained herein are the sole ones of the authors and are not to be construed as reflecting the views of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences or the Department of Defense.

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