

The Presidential Campaign One Toxic Mess

By Larry M. Starr and Tom Guggino

Why do we feel frustrated, afraid, angry and depressed over the presidential choices? Many blame our unhappiness directly on the weaknesses, inadequacies and failures of the candidates. We attribute to them a host of negative characteristics and bemoan there is no one truly representing our personal interests or the best interests of the country. Many Americans report they are conflicted not only over candidates but also between voting and not voting this November.

We blame the candidates because they possess significant flaws. Some of their current and past behaviors seem unforgivable so we may not trust them, and we are threatened by their anticipated future decisions and actions. But, while personality and behavior can explain part of our emotional turmoil, that does not completely account for the mess in which we find ourselves.

We believe that our presidential problem is actually due to a reactive mix of three ingredients, what management scientists call a *toxic triangle*. Taken individually, each produces distress. But when the three are blended together, the product is a poisonous toxic mess.

The first ingredient of the toxic triangle mess is, of course, the negative and possibly destructive leadership characteristics of the candidates. There is no shortage of examples of negative behaviors and attitudes, self-serving beliefs and skewed values that demonstrate apparent ignorance or disregard of fact, truth and the current or past reality. Indeed, fact-checking by news agencies and bloggers has become a routine part of candidate comparisons. From one candidate we are exposed to a narcissistic argument for trusting only personalized power, and an ideology of hate and fear which demonizes those who are not "like us." From another we learn of deceptions and failures to disclose personal and professional communications that may violate national security, and tacit or explicit compliance with political policies and partners which have led to self-serving outcomes. Perhaps because the personal histories of both major candidates contain so many negative life events, their psychological baggage is being translated into an incessant bombardment of media commercials, interviews and stump speeches, wherein the other candidate is portrayed with language and images that violate our norms of fairness, appropriateness and credibility. The ongoing diatribes are not only painful to witness, the insult-driven campaign is a national embarrassment.

Since the 1980s, much has been learned about those who exhibit *pseudo transformational leadership*. Authentic and transformational leaders influence people to exert extra and exceptional efforts in order to achieve the common goal or a greater good such as emphasizing "what you can do for your country." But a *pseudo transformational leader* behaves for self-interest. Such a person is often persuasive and inspires followers. However, s/he eventually violates trust and ultimately brings harm. Business leaders

responsible for the collapse of investors' confidence and finances are commonly identified as charismatic and visionary, but their low level of moral behavior has led to destruction of wealth and harm to their employees' careers and investments. While this kind of leader may suggest they are interested in helping others in need, their real intention is to gain an opportunity for self aggrandizement.

The second ingredient of the *toxic triangle mess* is our conducive environment, locally and globally, which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The “new normal” is not at all normal; it is fraught with confusions and conflicts. One candidate claims that we are in obvious and imminent danger from evil abroad and within, that our previously safe harbors are threatened and that worse will follow unless we build walls and eject the offenders often in advance of their actions. We are told that those who have been in charge of our national safety and security, social, economic and financial policies are all incompetent and incapable of changing things for the better. The solution offered is the one candidate who can be trusted to take charge and to solve these obvious and pressing problems, using means that are necessarily less important than the ends.

Another candidate presents a narrative in which individually and as a nation we are in control, getting better, and will remain so by holding to the current path. The political and cultural climate is active but not out of control. Compared to car accidents, heart disease and other “normal” concerns, we are not threatened any more now than we were in the past. Indeed, we are making significant and incremental improvements in safety and security that demonstrate that our local and global strategies, which are embedded in humanistic democratic processes, will be successful in the end.

We are living in a paradoxical environment characterized by conflicting events, circumstances and meanings. We are simultaneously reminded that diversity and cultural differences enable creativity, but also that many who hold divergent political and cultural beliefs want to impose on everyone a way of life that requires following a narrow set of values and practices. We are asked to trust our guardian institutions, but also that security is regularly violated and agreement about what to do is absent. With open source access of information, there is no official publically trusted news or information provider; no trusted government or financial security sources; everything is suspect and questioned as to the value it can provide.

The third ingredient of our *toxic triangle mess* concerns the millions of Americans who are impressed by and support a destructive candidate who offers apparently easy solutions to complex problems in the turbulent environment. Millions of susceptible followers see each of these leaders as holding answers to their personal, cultural and national problems and threats. While the followers are diverse, they hold similar world views and they accept or share values of the candidate.

We are all part of and responsible for this toxic mess because we allow the candidates to capture our personal attention, and we allow the media services to present unfiltered polemics representing the perspectives of the candidates. We acknowledge these destructive leaders and we allow ourselves and our organizations to spend millions of

dollars selling their candidacy. Research on followers and followership has been emerging over the past two decades. Followers of destructive leaders in turbulent and unpredictable environments tend to be conformers with deep unmet needs, low core self-evaluations and low maturity.

We should stop blaming only the candidates and start looking more at ourselves. Here are three suggestions that offer some degree of personal control over this mess: First, vote for the candidate who is most likely to recommend a member of the Supreme Court who shares your interests, values and the best interests of the country. While the President of the United States is elected to a term of office during which he or she must work with the House and Senate to make many changes, Supreme Court Justices have a lasting impact on our way of life. Second, learn about and vote for local representatives with whom you share values and who will promote these in their political activities. Elect people who are best able to meet the interests and needs of the communities, local and state, in which you are a resident. Third, acknowledge that voting is a right that cannot be taken lightly and that a conflict where neither choice is acceptable is painful. Then make a deliberate and ethical decision in the voting booth concerning the representatives for whom you vote.

We can better navigate the toxic mess and better avoid it from spilling over and controlling our politics if we stop looking to candidates as super heroes who can suspend reality and fix our complex problems with super powers. That would be entertainment, not the political world in which we actually live.

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