

Toxic Leaders: Implications for Record-Keeping by Organizations

Owen Ambur, March 3, 2009

In *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them*, Jean Lipman-Blumen, says: “Although it is hard to believe, we tend to *prefer* toxic leaders for a host of tantalizing reasons...” Indeed, she asserts, “When we don’t have them, we go to great lengths to create them.” (p. 11)

Beginning to build her case, she notes poll results suggesting that public expectations for the morality of congressional leaders falls well below those for ordinary citizens. (p. 11) With respect to the dynamics leading to such low expectations, she notes that “Prominent supporters, from political parties to boards of directors who help catapult the leader into office, assiduously protect their leaders’ power – tied, as it is, to their own self-interest.” Indeed, she asserts, “Many influential supporters collude willingly, others follow blindly, and still others are drawn unwittingly into compromising actions that hand the leader a club to hold over them.” (p. 12)

Contributing to the necessary illusions to support these dynamics, she observes that “autobiographies of leaders paint their authors ... only from the most flattering angle.” (p. 15) Ironically, even records managers, who are supposed to be the guardians of the integrity of the record, have tacitly colluded to legitimize such a positively biased view not only of our leaders but also ourselves by adopting as doctrine the notion that someone must “declare” a record in order for it to *be* a record.

Such a self-aggrandizing policy might be termed the *Capone Consultancy Method* of records management. Al Capone was a famous Chicago gangster. While the authorities were unable to convict him for any of the murders he allegedly ordered, he was finally imprisoned for tax evasion, i.e., declaring a record of his income that clearly could not be reconciled with his holdings.¹ Indeed, declaring a record that is different than the one that is created by one’s actual business processes is the classic way to commit fraud. Thus, by accepting as dictum that someone must “declare” are record to be a record before it becomes a record, records management policy has, in effect, unwittingly supported the commission of fraud. The colloquialism applied to such a policy is “keeping two sets of books.”

Lipman-Blumen suggests, “the great benefits that *good* leaders can bring make us want to invest *all* leaders, deserving or not, with these constructive attributes.” (p. 15) However, Malcolm Gladwell notes that the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) occurs when we overestimate the importance of fundamental character traits and underestimate the importance of the situation and context when interpreting the behavior of others.² So the error that Lipman-Blumen cites with respect to *different* leaders is also applicable to the *very same* leaders we have grown to trust and admire when they are placed in situations that may prompt them to act “out of character”.

¹ For more on the history of Al Capone, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Capone

² For more on Gladwell’s views in relation to records management, see <http://ambur.net/tippoint.pdf>

Moreover, James Surowiecki notes that expertise is “spectacularly narrow.” (p. 32) So the wisdom of relying upon the leadership of even the most highly respectable, admirable, and trustworthy people is highly suspect outside their particular, relatively narrow domains of expertise.³

Lipman-Blumen notes that leadership is often “treated as *action* by the leader directed toward or against others” but instead it should be viewed as “*interaction* between leaders and their followers.” (p.17) Robert Larison goes further and suggests that leadership is really about *followership*. If others refuse to follow, leaders cannot lead.⁴ Thus, leadership has more to do with the actions of followers than of leaders.

An implication is that Lipman-Blumen herself may be operating under a *control myth* that leaders are *required*. (Her explanation of the control myths is discussed below.) Is it possible that continuing to look for, anoint, and defer to leaders is not only unnecessary but also counter-productive. Might that not be particularly true since their trustworthiness is so bound to context and their expertise cannot possibly be sufficiently broad to uphold the interests of any of us all of the time, much less all of us all of the time? At the risk of being labeled an anarchist, might it not be better simply to focus on those objectives for which collaboration with others is required in order to achieve progress and some measure of success?⁵ Might not it be sufficient in most instances for peers to interact directly with each other on the basis of common interests and, more specifically, shared objectives?

Turning to the relationship of individual toxic leaders to the organizations within which they operate, Lipman-Blumen says organizations can provide their own toxins, through counterproductive policies and practices, including unreasonable goals, excessive internal competition, and cultures that assign blame. (p. 17) Indeed, Roger Connors, Tom Smith and Craig Hickman have argued the entire character of America is in crisis, due to an odd combination of avoiding responsibility, telling others what to do, and deflecting blame.⁶ To the degree their assertions may be true, it is unsurprising that organizations may adhere to the methods and mores of the broader socioeconomic cultures within which they have been formed.

Unrealistic goals create scapegoats, the definition of which is to be assigned responsibility without the requisite authority and resources. However, blame can only exist in the absence of good and complete records. If such records are readily available to stakeholders, blame becomes irrelevant – because who did what, when they did or did not do what they should have done, and the results of their actions or inaction are all perfectly clear. Moreover, if goals arise from the bottom-up, as specified by individuals rather than “leaders,” might not the natural selection process lead not only to better goals that are more closely aligned with the interests of the stakeholders involved but also to more efficient allocation of resources and more effective achievement of the desired outcomes?

³ For more on Surowiecki’s views in relation to records management, see <http://ambur.net/crowdwisdom.pdf>

⁴ For more on Larison’s views, see <http://ambur.net/French&Raven.htm>

⁵ For a description of anarchism as a political philosophy, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarchy#Anarchism>

⁶ For more on Connors, Smith, Hickman’s views, see <http://ambur.net/ambur/oz.htm>

Contributing to counterproductive outcomes, Lipman-Blumen observes the following characteristic *destructive behaviors* of toxic leaders:

- Consciously feeding their followers illusions.
- Stifling constructive criticism.
- Misleading followers through deliberate untruths ... [which they may actually come to believe because their followers do.] Charles Ford notes that we use lies to others in order to deceive ourselves. That is, if we tell others something enough times, we can come to believe it ourselves.⁷
- Subverting ... structures and processes of the system intended to generate truth ... [most particularly, records management systems.]
- Identifying scapegoats ... [which can only happen if good records are lacking.]
- Ignoring or promoting incompetence, cronyism, and corruption [again, which can only occur in the absence of good records.] (pp. 19 & 20)

“At some tipping point,” she says, “followers may revolt and attempt to bring down bad leaders. Still, the majority of followers stay the course, many because the barriers to escape seem much too strong ...” (p. 24) Tipping points, the positive sides of which Gladwell has addressed, are also facilitated by the lack of good and complete records, readily available to stakeholders.⁸ If such records are available, it may still be necessary for a tipping point to be reached before bad leaders are dethroned. However, at least the balance will be shifted on the basis of good information, rather than merely rumor, innuendo and sensational stories, and the fulcrum can be moved incrementally and systematically, based upon good evidence accumulated incrementally, rather than haphazardly all of a sudden.

Regarding the dynamics of how the need for removal may result, Lipman-Blumen identifies six psychological factors enabling the ascendance of toxic leaders:

1. Need for reassuring authority figures
2. Need for security and certainty⁹
3. Need to feel chosen or special
4. Need for membership in the human community
5. Fear of ostracism
6. Fear of personal powerlessness (p. 29)

In light of those factors, she says “we feel quite impotent when it comes to challenging toxic leaders or altering the dysfunctional systems they have put in place... So, we often passively surrender to such leaders. We just don’t challenge them. Indeed, we change ourselves, adapting

⁷ For more on Ford’s views, see <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>

⁸ For more on Gladwell’s views on tipping points in relation to records management, see <http://ambur.net/tippoint.pdf>

⁹ Charles Handy has argued that organizations need to move “beyond certainty.” For a discussion of his views in relation to records management, see <http://ambur.net/certainty.htm>

to the world they create.” (p. 43) Leaders create reality by declaring what the record shall be. Thus, they can be challenged indirectly by the insistence of followers that good record-keeping systems be implemented and maintained.

The buzzword currently being applied to this concept is *transparency*. However, if history is any predictor of future results, the risk is high that much of the talk about transparency will prove to be just that ... talk. That will certainly be true if we allow our leaders to lull us with illusions of transparency while failing to implement systems and procedures not only that maintain and share good and complete records but also provide metrics by which their own performance can be assessed with respect to records management.

Lipman-Blumen observes that group dynamics can cause us to change our behavior because when we become part of a group we give up responsibility for exercising our own conscience, which would normally guide our actions as individuals. (p. 44) In many cases that is fine. Indeed, it is often necessary because we simply cannot make as many decisions as would be required to conduct our daily lives without following conventions and the lead of others.¹⁰ Moreover, Donald Norman has pointed out that precise behavior is usually not required in order to achieve acceptable results, and Herbert Simon coined the term "satisficing" to apply to circumstances in which people settle for a satisfactory level of winning rather than search for an optimal solution.¹¹ On the other hand, Lipman-Blumen avers:

Sometimes the people at the center don't know what they are doing. And, given their exclusionary proclivities, they are unlikely to take counsel or correction from those outside the charmed circle. If groupthink, that premature rush to consensus described by psychologist Irving Janus, begins to invade the power center, emperors may very well parade without clothes and proceed without counsel. They may even begin to blend and reshape warnings from others, several circles out and with less power, to suit their own beliefs. (pp. 62 & 63)

Lipman-Blumen notes that “Finding or, better yet, creating meaning in our lives provides the central task for most healthy humans... Noble visions often call for dedication to make the world a better place. Committing ourselves to an altruistic cause is indeed exhilarating. Participating in such a vision gives us clear direction, a rationale for our lives, and a path to meaning.” (p. 63) However, she highlights the fact that such dynamics also can easily lead us astray if we suspend judgment and merely follow those adept at giving voice to what may seem in uncritical light to be a high-minded, if not a divine cause.

Moreover, she notes that “Constant change, seasoned with ambiguity, increases our vulnerability to toxic leaders. They promise to allay those fears and protect us – despite the fact they can't. In the anxiety of such moments, we become only too willing to trade our fears for the sheltering

¹⁰ Not only are we incapable of making too many choices but having too many options also makes us less happy. For an interesting and entertaining discourse on that topic, see the video of Barry Schwartz's presentation on the paradox of choice at http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.html

¹¹ For more on Norman's views on “Things that Make Us Smart,” see <http://ambur.net/smart.htm>

‘security’ of a strong leader, one with a clear ideology and a clear explanation of the disturbing changes exploding around us, a leader who can bring meaning to our chaotic world.” (p. 73) Ambiguity is fostered by the lack and/or inaccessibility of good records. Thus, our vulnerability to and the power of leaders are increased by the failure to apply good record-keeping systems and processes that are capable of keeping up with the pace of change. If all of the facts are clearly established in accessible, reliable records, decision-making is easy. It is the absence of good information that creates the requirement for decisive leaders.

Of course, decisiveness per se is not a bad trait, but Lipman-Blumen observes we are often led astray by the belief – not only by leaders but also followers – that “leaders know best and followers should simply put themselves in their hands.” In such cases, she notes, “Followers often withdraw into the shell of their anxiety without demanding until later, if at all, the reasoning and facts behind the leader’s decision.” (p. 78) However, decisiveness in the absence of the best available information is foolishness. So too is the lack of information that was once and may still be well known to someone but is unavailable when needed by decision-makers due to poor record-keeping systems.

Lipman-Blumen asserts that many of us willingly and often enthusiastically surrender our freedom to leaders who promise us four things:

1. A new, demanding ideology with a clear set of beliefs and rules ... [Beliefs are required when facts are unclear, due to the lack of high-quality records.]
2. Unambiguous roles into which followers can button themselves ...
3. A rationale for a new social order ...
4. A continuing, reassuring relationship with ... a seemingly omnipotent leader ... [e.g., supported by high personal approval ratings in polling data] (p. 80)

She notes that the structures of society, formal and informal, are slanted toward keeping leaders in power. “In fact,” she observes, “we deliberately design political constitutions and practices, as well as corporate bylaws, to prevent the casual removal of leaders. That way, we believe, societies and organizations may enjoy a reasonable level of stability.” (p. 82)

Lipman-Blumen highlights the power of *control myths*, which “convince followers that they can’t or shouldn’t even try to topple a toxic leader once in power...” She suggests those myths are linked to our existential fears and psychological needs, becoming intertwined with our self-esteem and the achievement ethic of our particular culture. Insightfully, she notes that *rationalizations* are explanations of which we convince ourselves as to why we *can* or *cannot* act. Eventually, rationalizations harden into control myths, which she defines as “beliefs we solemnly hold about why we *should* or *should not* act.” Ultimately, those beliefs rigidify within our superegos and control our behavior. (p. 127)

With reference to our motivations, she cites Maslow conceptualization of *transcendence*, which he believed represents the ultimate level of personal growth – beyond self-actualization – at which human beings are able to rise above self-interest and find fulfillment in helping others

reach *their* potential. In theory, individuals who achieve transcendence are capable of forgoing their own personal interests and self-concerns. (p. 129)

That is certainly a lofty vision that most of us may easily accept as a perceived ideal, not only for ourselves but especially for those to whom we ascribe the legitimacy of leadership. However, Lipman-Blumen suggests it can become twisted into a rationalization for acceptance of toxic leaders as we strive to “rise above narrow personal considerations” and “*find meaning by participating in something greater than [ourselves], in some really important cause, like helping others.*” (pp. 130 & 131)

Aside from the issue of irrational support for toxic leaders, Surowiecki argues that deferring our judgment to others, however enlightened and noble we may believe them to be, leads to less than optimal outcomes. Instead, the way for us to avoid being influenced by groupthink and bias associated with *information cascades* is to exercise our own, independent judgment as free as possible from our perceptions of the views of others.¹²

Be that as it may, Lipman-Blumen reiterates that such rationalizations may harden into control myths that “freeze us into inaction.” Moreover, “[b]ecause we submerge control myths below the surface of consciousness, we rarely notice them at work.” She says they are like “virus infected programs that gradually degrade what we are trying to do.” (pp. 131 & 132)

To the degree that we buy into such rationalizations, we also acquire the self-serving excuse, “If bad things happen from our following the leader, we can’t be held to blame.” (p. 133) Furthermore, as Lipman-Blumen highlights, “Control Myths That Enable Us to Avoid Our Own Responsibilities as Leaders ... are very useful for convincing us that we don’t have to shoulder the difficult tasks of leadership.” (p. 134)

She suggests control myths concerned with ennoblement and immortality may be the most dangerous of all because they render us vulnerable to leaders, good or bad, who enlist us to help realize their “noble visions” but do not inform us how to distinguish between constructive versus toxic leaders. (p. 135)

Control myths can be very potent, and since they operate below consciousness, she says we don’t examine them or question their validity. Moreover, since we act as they dictate, we transform them into self-fulfilling prophecies, thereby further strengthening our belief in them. In other words, Lipman-Blumen asserts:

... we use ... control myths ... to control our *own* behavior. Control myths soothe our anxiety and calm our fears. They tell us what to do and what not to do. They warn us of consequences of ignoring their “wisdom.” They also help us go about our lives, pursuing our own interests and leaving the complex issues to the leader. The control myths immobilize not only our minds and our hearts. They also disable our mouths, our

¹² Surowiecki’s explanation of *information cascades* is available at <http://ambur.net/crowdwisdom.pdf>

brains, our brawn, and sometimes our computers... By keeping ourselves in check, we give leaders free rein to act however they choose. (p. 136)

Her views about control myths are closely aligned with Charles Ford's assertion that we use lies to others in order to deceive ourselves.¹³

Lipman-Blumen cites Cloke and Goldsmith's argument that hierarchy, bureaucracy, and autocracy depend upon such myths and democracy requires that they be dismantled. Indeed, she asserts powerless individuals and groups exist "only within the framework of a hierarchy that dictates the relative authority, prestige, and resources of different groups." (p. 137)

However, representative democracy itself dictates such a hierarchical structure. Local jurisdictions are subject to the laws of the States and the States are in turn subservient to the mandates of the Federal Government. While individuals may be entitled to one vote in each election, what they are voting for is to divest their power to a candidate who is highly unlikely to represent their interests in all instances, and even to the degree elected officials may truly represent the interests of most of their constituents most of the time, by virtue of their election, they are granted powers that ordinary citizens lack

According to Wikipedia two principles are common to all definitions of democracy: First, all members of the society (citizens) have equal access to power and, second, all members (citizens) enjoy universally recognized freedoms and liberties.¹⁴ Based upon the former of those principles, representative democracy is not truly democracy because it establishes classes of elected officials with disproportionate access to power relative to their constituents.

Lipman-Blumen cites Oberlin College president Robert Fuller's observation that the "rankism" occurs in hierarchies, creating distinctions between "somebodies" (e.g., elected officials) and "nobodies" (e.g., mere voters). Notwithstanding their complaints about suffering under toxic leaders, she says followers help sustain such leaders in power by internalizing control myths and adhering to their immobilizing dictates. (p. 137) Not only is the rate of reelection of incumbents high but the notion that we may not always and forever be required to defer our personal power to the elected elite is unthinkable.

Since they operate below consciousness, we have difficulty connecting control myths to our behavior. However, Lipman-Blumen believes we are capable of raising our rationalizations and control myths to consciousness and challenging them. (p. 137 & 138) Perhaps the best way to do so might be to make our assumptions and explanations explicit by documenting them in records that not only we but also our friends, family, and business associates can examine and either refute or bolster with additional evidence.

Lipman-Blumen posits three types of followers:

¹³ For more on Ford's views on the psychology of deceit, see <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>

¹⁴ *Goal-Free Living: How to Have the Life You Want Now!* Steven M. Shapiro. (p. 5)

Benign type A or anxious benign followers, who want a leader to reassure them through grand illusions that they will find safety ... by participating in the leader's "noble vision."

Benign type B or pragmatic benign followers, who are driven by practical concerns: their personal, economic, professional, or political well-being... Sometimes, greed and ambition prompt these P types to encourage the leader to engage in unethical or criminal practices or simply to turn a blind eye to signs of incipient toxicity. (p. 140)

Malevolent followers, who are driven by avarice, ambition, envy, or competitiveness. (p. 141)

As followers, she suggests that we might ask ourselves such questions as: "What does it take for us to act on the basis of realistic, pragmatic directions and goals? How do we kick our addiction to visions? How do we learn to forgo illusions and all the traps that come attached to them?" While a legitimate, exalted vision can be inspiring, she cautions that we must be capable of acting intelligently without one. (p. 143)

Taking an examination of goals further in that direction, Stephen Shapiro has suggested that some people are far too driven by ambition and would be better served by ditching forward-looking goals and living more in each moment. He says, "Goal-free people don't necessarily live life free from all goals [but] they live free from the stranglehold of goals that grips so many people." Instead, "they live experientially in each moment. A life of *their* design rather than that which society tells them to live."¹⁵ By contrast, Norman suggests, "the greatest peril is that of experiencing when one should be reflecting ... where entertainment takes precedence over thought."¹⁶

Of the two approaches, Shapiro's seems far more likely to risk mindless acquiescence to the whims of toxic leaders, who may only be too happy to step into the vacuum of our lack of personal vision. However, rather than to try to paint his argument into that corner, a more productive view is to acknowledge that anything taken to extreme can be bad, and two of the keys to avoiding adverse consequences are to ensure that we are: a) acting at all times in accord with basic, enduring values and principles that define our essential character, and b) closely monitoring the effects of our actions, as documented in current, complete, and reliable records.

"Because so many leaders' power is built on the illusion that the leader is both omniscient and omnipotent," Lipman-Blumen observes, "they have a hard time admitting failure." (p. 145) How else could many corporate leaders justify their outrageous levels of compensation? Their self-interests are much better served by ignoring the record of their actual intentions, actions, and results and continuing to operate under the control myth that they simply must be so handsomely compensated lest disaster befall the corporate empires over which they rule.

¹⁵ Goal-Free Living: How to Have the Life You Want Now! Steven M. Shapiro. (p. 5)

¹⁶ For more on Norman's views on "things that make us smart," see <http://ambur.net/smart.htm>

“To shore up a flawed vision gone awry,” Lipman-Blumen says, “an initially nontoxic leader may begin to exaggerate and then downright dissemble.” (p. 145) “Even in noncrisis times,” she asserts:

... a deadly circular dynamic can take shape: The leader becomes impatient for “clear evidence” on which to base a decision and, in turn, pressures the staff to come up with the data. Feeling the hot breath of the leader’s urgency, staff members rapidly scrape together tenuous data, presenting them as more substantial than they really are. Or staffers feel pressured into vouching for them. The results: The leader makes the decision based upon flimsy evidence, inevitably leading to poor results. (p. 159)

To counteract such dynamics, organizations need regular, routine means of gathering and maintaining reliable records from highly diverse sources as a routine by-product of their ongoing business processes, and those records should be fully and freely shared with the organization’s stakeholders.

One might think that the Fourth Estate (i.e., the news media) could be a positive force for revealing truth and holding leaders accountable and, presumably, for the most part, that may be the case.¹⁷ However, Lipman-Blumen highlights a way in which the actual impact of the media may be perverse:

... CEOs admitted that they felt intimidated by the media... One ... general counsel advised against demanding a retraction of an incorrect story ... a retraction, no matter how well deserved, would have left the company vulnerable to future bad press by an embarrassed and resentful reporter ... leaders are urged to shrink from confronting the media on issues of truth and accuracy. (p. 169)

On the other hand, the corrupting influence of media relations is hardly one-way. Lipman-Blumen describes it as a “mutual seduction,” in which “the media abandon their role as chroniclers and join the ranks of the leaders’ followers. When the media come too close too often in an effort to get the scoop and maintain access, they court the danger of dulling their objectivity.” Moreover, she asserts, yet “[a]nother danger lurks: The media can push nontoxic leaders into toxic inaction.” (p. 171)

Even more than the news media, of course, corporate boards of directors are supposed to be equipped to oversee and direct executive action. However, as Lipman-Blumen observes, board members “often allow corporate leaders to spin them around in a game of organizational blindman’s bluff.” (p. 172) Moreover, she asserts, “the process by which we select and appoint leaders, in many cases, tends to provoke the emergence of the more neurotically ambitious individuals, who elbow their way past their more balanced, less obsessed peers.” (p. 193)

¹⁷ For an explanation of the history of usage of the term *Fourth Estate*, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Estate

Lipman-Blumen suggests, “Forcing a three-way confrontation among the distressed followers, the toxic leader, and another party who has some oversight responsibility ... can be useful. But ... this is risky business, and there is much homework to be done before such a confrontation is arranged...” She cautions that those contemplating such confrontations should first document all relevant details about the leader’s bad and unacceptable behavior. (p. 198) In other words, it is necessary to have good and complete records whose integrity is assured. A substantial portion of the risk associated with such confrontations is based upon the fact that charges are often unfounded or, at least, a matter of opinion or style rather than independently verifiable evidence documented in reliable records.

“To some degree,” Lipman-Blumen laments, “we have come to take abuse and corruption for granted... Some turn a blind eye to the chicanery ... in the hope that, as the faithful followers of the toxic leader, they might share some of [the] perks. Power relationships have always carried that hidden – if usually unfulfilled – promise.” (p. 200) Even those of us who do not stand to gain may nonetheless be operating under the control myth not only that such leaders will always exist but, even more basically, that leaders are required at all (in many instances where they may not be.)

She cites Kurt Lewin’s field theory of social behavior, in which *driving forces* are counterbalanced by *restraining forces*, and notes the importance of technology in spreading information about toxic deeds. (pp. 206 & 207) While she does not suggest as much, information technology now holds the potential to vastly reduce, if not entirely eliminate the need for deference to leaders who hold power due to their positions in static hierarchies. The old-fashioned legitimacy accorded to such positions may be outmoded. The possibility now exists that hierarchies may be replaced by highly dynamic meritocracies based upon high-quality information contained in highly reliable record. Information technology is a driving force against which the restraining forces of traditional hierarchies may not indefinitely prevail.¹⁸

Addressing the risk of taking on toxic leaders, Lipman-Blumen notes that whistleblowers are commonly subjected to “whispering war” and that the individual’s reputation can quickly be tarnished beyond repair by the rumor mill. (p. 218) However, rumors thrive when more authoritative information is lacking and, of course, it is not only the reputation of the whistleblower that is at stake but also that of the “leader” in question. In any case, the traditional notion of *reputation* may be overblown, if not completely outmoded in the information age. At the very least, reputation is no *substitute* for good, reliable, and highly relevant records. Surowiecki has pointed out that expertise is “spectacularly narrow” and Gladwell has noted that actual behavior is highly relative to context. Thus, if not being highly illusory, it is risky at best to take reputation as a surrogate for evidence (records) that is directly applicable to the issue at hand – regardless of whether it is the reputation of the whistleblower or the allegedly “toxic” leader that is at stake.

With regard to the establishment of evidence, Lipman-Blumen acknowledges that even “nontoxic” (presumably “good”) leaders can make “fateful mistakes” but that *accountability*

¹⁸ For a discussion of the bases of power in the information age, see <http://ambur.net/French&Raven.htm>

forums can help to raise the salient questions required to understand what went wrong so as to try to avoid making the same mistakes again. She says, “The issue is not simply the substance of the decision, right or wrong, but the process.” Moreover, “Leaders who cannot confront their own mistakes, both privately and publicly, are probably not leaders we can trust with decisions that affect our lives.” (p. 218)

With respect to the impact on our lives, she notes that leaders, both good and bad, “create enterprises in which we can feel we are living most intensely, where we are completely present in the moment.” (p. 221) While such feelings may be exhilarating and may generate tremendous energy and productivity, they can also cause us to suspend judgment and, thus, pose great risk of causing highly perverse outcomes, as unintended consequences of even the most apparently altruistic motives. Thus, Lipman-Blumen posits several questions that should be applied to the visions espoused by leaders:

- Is the vision noble and positive for you and your group but detrimental to innocent others?
- Have multiple groups, with different needs, vetted those choices and subjected them to second and third opinions to determine whether there is benefit to most and harm to none or very few?
- Does the vision require you to see others as enemies or tainted Others who must be ostracized or eradicated?
- Or does it provide the chance for antagonistic groups to start small, working together on limited mutual goals, so that they may build enough trust to move forward together gradually?
- Does it offer the possibility for different groups to specialize and thus work together interdependently?
- What kinds of sacrifices does the vision demand from you and others: money, labor, time, integrity, character, truth, justice, freedom, family and friends, or your very life?
- Will the vision stand the test of time and judgment of history? (pp. 223 - 225)

An even more basic test that should be applied to any vision is whether it is openly documented on the Web in a readily shareable format like AIIM’s emerging Strategy Markup Language (StratML). Certainly, anyone who seeks recognition as a leader, democratically elected or otherwise, should be expected to document not only his or her vision but also his or her general goals and more specific objectives in such format on the Web.

A second test implied in Lipman-Blumen’s questions but which should be made explicit is the degree to which the vision comports with our own deeply held values and principles.¹⁹

¹⁹ The emerging Strategy Markup Language (StratML) standard provides a means not only for documenting our values but also sharing them with others on the Web. For more information on StratML, see <http://stratml.us>

Beside the statement of vision, Lipman-Blumen suggests asking: “Does the leader become evasive, refusing to explain his or her decisions or even lying outright? Does the leader begin to reject the legitimacy of being held accountable for results?” (p. 226) A closely related and perhaps even more telling question is whether the leader believes he or she is too busy and too “important” to be expected to create and share good and complete records of his or her intents, actions, and results.

While Lipman-Blumen says many toxic leaders deal in illusions, she allows that it would be unfair to characterize *all* leaders as dream merchants. Indeed, she suggests, “Leaders committed to their supporters’ well-being, rather than to their own power ... are more likely to help followers forgo many of their illusions through painful, but strengthening, doses of reality... [Although] the process of disillusionment is painful for leaders, as well as followers” she says, “Constructive leaders refuse to succumb to illusions or to offer them to us. Indeed, they insist on shattering even those we create for ourselves.” (pp. 238 & 239)

She says, “Leaders who disillusion us ... *expect us to create the solutions for which we so desperately look to them.*” (emphasis added) “They may even ask us to set aside our current activities in which we are happily immersed and, instead, put our shoulder to the wheel of community leadership.” She calls that “the *valuable inconvenience of leadership.*” (p. 229) However, it seems unlikely that many candidates for democratically elected office can afford such inconvenience, lest they fail to achieve election. In reality, how many politicians campaign on platforms of bringing home the personal responsibility rather than the pork, which in times of economic crisis conveniently morphs into “economic stimulus”?²⁰

Indeed, Lipman-Blumen acknowledges that leaders who disillusion us ask us to face up to two unpleasant tasks:

First, they insist we unbundle our needs ... from the control myths that keep us that keep us in the toxic leader’s grasp.

Second, they urge us to confront our existential angst and let it rise to the level of consciousness, where we can put it to positive, creative use...

“So,” she says, “it is not hard to understand why we commonly prefer toxic leaders. We respond to them because they offer us free lunches” laced with political pork. The illusions they offer, “cushion us from reality and the anxiety that attends it...” Lulling us with the illusion that the omnipotent leader can protect us from harm prevents us from facing and coping with the threats that reality inevitably presents. (p. 231) However, she asserts, “Facing up to reality, difficult as

²⁰ President Kennedy made his famous statement “Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country” in his inaugural address, after he had been elected. Did he emphasize that theme during his campaign? Certainly, no major candidate in recent memory has run on personal and family responsibility as a central theme of his or her campaign. However, in real-time ratings of the rhetoric of politicians, focus groups tend to indicate strong support for such themes, so it would be interesting and encouraging to see a national campaign run on such a platform.

that may be, sets us on the path to maturity and clear-eyed confidence... Dealing with reality forces us to take responsibility for ourselves and develop new coping strategies.” (pp. 229-231)

Lipman-Blumen observes that “truth in an unfinished world is always a work in progress,” and that is particularly true if we must constantly re-create information that was previously known but not documented or is otherwise unavailable when and where needed. “Yet,” she asserts, “what first appears to be a quixotic search for the most current discernable truth ultimately turns out to be not only important but unavoidable... Nonetheless, we must accept the reality that, at any specific moment in time, we may not be able to determine and final and complete truth. We may simply have to live with the knowledge that much uncertainty inevitably remains in an unfinished world.” (p. 231) Again, that is certainly true to the degree that we fail to create, maintain, and efficiently access and use good and complete records.

Lipman-Blumen suggests, “Only when we accept that life is uncertain, that its meaning may never become totally clear, that anything can happen, but that we must go forward nonetheless, can we feel the true exhilaration of living.” Furthermore, she avers, “Freedom from subservience to leaders, coupled with the necessity to take action despite our fears, may ... be far more important than finding an elusive truth.” (p. 232) Her suggestion in that regard is supported by Norman’s observation that precision often not required for perfectly acceptable performance in the real world. However, in the necessity to act, some courses of action may be more effective than others, and if the potential results may be harmful, the need for precision is greater in proportion to the risk. Moreover, to the degree that decision-making is centralized, the risk of serious missteps is far greater than if decisions are widely dispersed, e.g., in a market-based economy.

Lipman-Blumen suggest that we move beyond the search for truth and focus on the value of freedom – not merely freedom from fear but also freedom from illusions. (p. 233) However, taking human nature into account, her suggestion contains an inherent logical contradiction in terms – because granting ourselves “freedom” from *truth* is tantamount to giving us a free pass to *maintain* our illusions.

Clearly that is not a result which Lipman-Blumen means to imply, as she notes that illusions play a potent role in the dynamic among many leaders and their followers. She says effective leaders – good and bad – understand our abiding need for illusions but how they use illusions distinguishes constructive leaders from their toxic counterparts. “Non-toxic leaders focus on dreams *we* need to fulfill,” she says, whereas “toxic leaders ... play on their followers’ concerns, which they claim only *they* can handle.” (p. 237)

Again, however, her argument on this score is questionable in two respects and runs counter to another of her assertions on one of them. First, do we truly need leaders to help us fulfill *our* dreams? Is it not possible that we can and should assume responsibility, including leadership, to realize our own dreams? It has been said that a goal is *a dream with a deadline*. Do we really need others to set deadlines for us? At least in an ideal world, should we not establish our own priorities and time lines for achieving them?

Second, her implication that “constructive” leaders should be free to use illusions to inspire us to pursue our own dreams is a slippery slope. Where and how can the line be drawn between “good” and “bad” illusions? And if we are living in a world of illusions, how can we be sure that it is truly our own dreams that we are pursuing, rather than the dreams of someone who has something other than our own personal interests foremost at heart. (It is illogical to suggest that any leader, no matter how “good” he or she might be, can have all of their followers’ interests foremost in mind at any particular decision point.) Moreover, Lipman-Blumen herself asserts that good leaders *dis*-illusion us. To suggest that they also use illusions to get into our heads to motivate us to act on our own dreams is not only contrary to that assertion but also smacks of big-brother mind control.

With respect to that which exists only in our crania, Lipman-Blumen quotes Napoleon Bonaparte as reminding us, “There is no immortality except in the memory of the minds of men.” (p. 237) Obviously, though, such “immortality” is highly subjective and under the control of the (highly fallible) minds of others rather than the actor him or herself and, thus, is of highly questionable worth.²¹ By contrast, enduring value based upon reliable records and reflected in technological advancements benefitting humankind seems a far more worthy vision for which to strive.

Discussing strategies for freeing ourselves from toxic leaders and becoming more self-reliant, Lipman-Blumen references Kurt Lewin’s concept of *freezing*, *unfreezing*, and *refreezing* (p. 239) While those concepts refer to our mental states, they bear a key relationship to the information upon which we base our decisions and actions. Once they have been created, records should be maintained in inviolate form for as long as appropriate, based upon the associated business requirements. That is, in Lewin’s terms, they should be “frozen”. However, to the degree that records are maintained (frozen) in readily accessible, reusable format (e.g., XML), they can easily be referenced, indexed, copied (in part or in whole), repurposed, and reused as many times as necessary, thereby effectively supporting Lewin’s concept of freezing, unfreezing, and refreezing to spur personal and organizational learning and growth.

Lipman-Blumen suggests that moving from the dependency of a follower to the independence of a proactive constituent is an important step we can take to discover the “leader within” ourselves. As constituents, she says we can evaluate problems independently and determine what, if anything, *we* can do to resolve them versus what may require assistance from others. (Surowiecki asserts that independent judgment is *essential* for sound decision-making in many instances.) Thus, she asserts, “we can learn to forego our dependence on leaders and the debilitating illusions we have demanded from them. We can begin to look at our lives, our tasks, our organizations, and ourselves more realistically.” (p. 240) What she does not say but which is certainly true is that the only way we can regularly and routinely look and *see* our organizations, much less ourselves, *realistically* is through good and reliable records documenting not only our values and intents (goals and objectives) but also our actions as well as the results they beget.

²¹ For a discussion of the views of Daniel Schacter on the fallibility of human memory, see <http://ambur.net/memorysins.pdf>

Lipman-Blumen notes that democracy demands not only the ability to criticize our leaders but also “insists upon a far more painful capacity: the willingness to criticize ourselves and accept – at times solicit – critiques from others.” (p. 241) However, criticism is a poor substitute for records. One definition of the term “complaint” is an expression of a problem insufficient to effect action. Surely, the problem is not a lack of complaints. Indeed, Connors, Smith and Hickman have asserted that we have become a nation of complainers and the very character of our country is in crisis as a result.²²

What is required is not more complaints but, rather, more effective feedback from stakeholders who have direct interests not only in the expansive visions but, more specifically, on the explicitly documented goals and objectives set forth by those who would purport to lead us.

“As followers,” Lipman-Blumen says we should “seek out, support, and, if necessary, create ... leaders who refuse to provide illusions, leaders who may even insist upon puncturing the illusions we have fashioned for ourselves.” Unfortunately, she acknowledges, “we often prefer toxic leaders to those disillusioning leaders, who would press our noses to the dark window of life. Discomfortingly, good leaders pull the scales from our eyes. The demand that we face difficult truths.” (pp. 241 & 242)

However, she misses a key point, which is that we don’t necessarily need leaders to do this for us. To the contrary, in common discourse, when we speak of disillusionment with reference to leaders, we are referring to those who fail to achieve the *illusory* benefits *they* have promised (and we have willingly and unwittingly embraced) – not to those who speak the truth about our own illusions (i.e., our mental models of how we’d *like* the world to be versus as it truly exists).

We can dis-illusion ourselves, if we choose to do so – via records. Leaders should not be “created”; they should be *distinguished* as “leaders” by the records of the relative excellence of their acts and the results arising therefrom – within the relatively narrow spans of time and context that their particular forms of expertise reside. To greater or lesser degrees, we are all leaders. We have obligations not only to others but also to ourselves and we should not try to absolve ourselves of responsibilities by “creating” leaders as scapegoats for our own insecurities. In any event, to the degree that we allow records to do so, they will speak for themselves – not only with respect to the performance of our leaders but also ourselves.

Lipman-Blumen quotes psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, “The self is not something that one finds. It is something that one creates.” Accordingly, she asserts, “we need to *create* – rather than find, seek, or ask others to give us – the meaning in our life.” (p. 242) The highest mission in life for all of us is to create a record of which we can be truly and truthfully proud. And as we strive to do so, Lipman-Blumen concludes, “we should welcome the discomfort of competing ‘truths’ in our schools, in our politics, in our organizations, and in our lives.” (p. 246)

²² For more on the views of Connors, Smith, and Hickman, see <http://ambur.net/oz.htm>