ABOUT THE IMPACT AND EFFECTS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEES AND ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The concept of toxic leadership has emerged as a critical counterpoint to traditional leadership theories, particularly the Transformational Leadership Model. This model suggests that effective leaders are visionaries who develop and implement strategies to realize their vision while fostering the development and motivation of their teams. It emphasizes the positive and effective aspects of leadership, focusing on guiding organizations towards success in their current and future environments. However, this model has been critiqued for its lack of attention to the negative aspects of leadership. This critique has led to the development of the concept of toxic leadership, a taxonomy that includes a range of detrimental leadership behaviors. Some scholars categorize managerial incompetence as a form of toxic leadership, arguing that it undermines organizational agility and effectiveness. Incompetence in leadership roles can significantly impede an organization's operational and strategic capabilities. More recent explorations of toxic leadership have focused on passive-aggressive behaviors, identifying them as prevalent in organizational settings. This perspective broadens the scope of toxic leadership to include not only overtly aggressive or illegal actions but also more covert forms of destructive behavior. Some definitions of toxic leadership extend to behaviors at national and pseudo-national levels, such as genocide. This expansion underscores the potential for leadership toxicity to manifest in various forms and at different scales, from individual organizations to broader societal structures. The discourse on toxic leadership serves as a vital lens for examining the complexities and potential pitfalls of leadership, highlighting the need for a more holistic understanding of leadership that includes both its positive and negative dimensions.

Keywords

Introduction

Leadership is often hailed as the guiding force that shapes the destiny of organizations, teams, and societies. Effective leaders inspire and empower their followers, fostering a climate of growth and productivity. However, not all leadership is created equal. In the shadowed corners of leadership, a sinister phenomenon known as "toxic leadership" lurks, casting a pall over the individuals and environments it touches. Toxic leadership is a term that has gained increasing recognition and concern in recent years. It encompasses a spectrum of behaviors and characteristics displayed by leaders who, rather than nurturing their teams, create a toxic atmosphere characterized by fear, mistrust, and dysfunction. The ramifications of toxic leadership extend far beyond the immediate sphere of its influence and impacting both the micro and macro dimensions of institutional culture and performance. In this article, we have undertaken an examination of the defining characteristics of toxic leadership, analyzing some of its consequences and the effects on employees and organizational climate.

Through this exploration, the objective of this paper is twofold: firstly, to elevate the level of awareness regarding the nuanced nature and extensive reach of toxic leadership within organizational settings, and secondly, to provide insights into effective strategies for the prevention and mitigation of such leadership styles.

What is toxic leadership?

The discourse on toxic leadership is enriched by a lexicon that includes descriptors such as evil, toxic, abusive, destructive, incompetent, and unethical. This array of terms contributes to the complexity of discussions surrounding toxic leadership, often leading to confusion and constraints due to the ongoing debate about the very definition of the construct.

Toxic leadership manifests in a multitude of forms, ranging from overt aggression and widespread toxicity to more subtle, nonviolent behaviors typically encountered within organizational contexts. This diversity in toxic behaviors has prompted several scholars to develop taxonomies of toxic leadership. These taxonomies, as proposed in the works of Williams (2005), Schmidt (2008), and Pelletier (2009), focus on defining specific behaviors rather than profiling toxic leaders, an approach previously adopted by Whicker (1997) and Kellerman (2004).

The concept of toxic leadership has evolved from foundational leadership theories, notably the Transformational Leadership Model. This model, as articulated by Burns (1974) and Western (2008), posits that effective leaders inspire a vision of prosperity, devise strategies to realize this vision, and cultivate a team capable of propelling the organization towards success in both its current and future environments. While this model predominantly emphasizes the positive and successful facets of leadership, its efficacy has been questioned for not adequately addressing the negative aspects of leadership. The taxonomy of toxic or abusive leadership is broad, encompassing a wide array of behaviors. A prevalent view is that managerial incompetence is toxic, as it can significantly undermine organizational agility and effectiveness. Additionally, most scholars agree that abusive and illegal behaviors fall within the realm of toxic leadership. Commonly, the frequency and intent behind these behaviors are considered in defining toxicity, with hostility, which directly and negatively impacts individuals and groups, often being a predominant feature in descriptions of toxic leadership. In more recent studies, DeAngelis (2009) has highlighted passive-aggressive behaviors as a common form of toxicity in organizations. Some definitions of toxic leadership even extend to behaviors observed at national and pseudo-national levels, including acts as extreme as genocide. Fundamentally, toxic leadership encompasses behaviors that cause harm to employees and negatively impact organizational success.

Despite the wide range of behaviors associated with toxic and abusive leadership, it is important to note that not all organizations experience these behaviors to the same extent. For instance, crimes and physical abuse are relatively rare in most organizational settings. Moreover, while managerial incompetence is often linked with other toxic behaviors, it is not universally regarded as toxic in isolation. Toxic leaders typically engage in behaviors that intimidate, marginalize, and degrade employees, thereby harming individuals and threatening the success of the organization. Such leaders are known to blame, divide, marginalize, undermine, and intimidate employees, creating an environment that is detrimental to both the mission and the people of the organization. Their actions not only undermine a positive organizational climate but also erect barriers that stifle creativity and loyalty.

The phenomenon of toxicity within organizational contexts, whether emanating from leaders or colleagues, has been empirically linked to detrimental impacts on productivity. Research by Kusy and Holloway (2009) revealed that 50% of individuals experiencing toxic interactions reported a diversion of their focus from work to worrying, with 25% explicitly

reducing their work activity. These findings suggest that prolonged exposure to toxic environments can significantly impair creativity and innovation. The genesis of toxicity in leadership involves a range of behaviors and practices. Toxic leaders often engage in arbitrary discipline and set unattainable standards, creating an atmosphere where subordinates prioritize personal safety over productivity (Reed & Olsen, 2010). Such leaders employ tactics of intimidation and marginalization, fostering a climate of fear and compliance. In their quest to maintain control, toxic leaders frequently create outgroups and scapegoats, attributing all organizational problems to these entities (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). This behavior not only diverts attention from constructive work but also perpetuates a culture of blame and division. Toxic leaders are characterized by their autocratic and arrogant demeanor, often exhibiting emotional instability that undermines a positive organizational climate (Reed & Olsen, 2010). Their leadership style includes public verbal abuse, withholding praise or support, and engaging in retaliatory actions (Tepper, 2007). Such leaders often prioritize personal gain over the well-being of employees and the organization.

A common strategy employed by toxic leaders is the creation of in-groups and out-groups, using the latter as scapegoats for any problems, thereby consolidating their control and power (Conger, 1990; Ashforth, 1994; Whicker, 1996; Lipman, 2005). This divisive approach not only distracts employees from their work but also fosters an environment of distrust and internal conflict. Toxic leaders are known for their punishment-oriented approach and inability to distinguish personal feelings from professional matters (Whicker, 1996; Kellerman, 2004). They manipulate by appealing to and rewarding loyalty, often at the expense of competence, thereby perpetuating a climate of internal strife and distraction from organizational goals.

The toxic leader's focus on loyalty and compliance often leads to a suppression of informal interaction and association among followers. They create a siege mentality, suggesting that organizational survival hinges on follower loyalty. This approach is instrumental in maintaining strict control over information flow and is a tactic used to suppress criticism, dissent, initiative, and creativity (Conger, 1990; Ashforth, 1994; Lipman, 2005).

Passive-aggressive toxic leadership is characterized by an aversion to direct conflict. Instead of confronting issues, these leaders employ tactics of marginalization and intimidation to suppress conflict, thereby inflating their own egos and reputation. They are known to overload competent employees without the intention of rewarding them, often taking credit for their subordinates' achievements. Such leaders demonstrate a lack of respect as a means of asserting power, engaging in petty tactics like habitual tardiness to meetings they have scheduled (DeAngelis, 2009). Kusy and Holloway (2009) found that these behaviors are prevalent at all levels of organizations and among the most frequently reported.

Toxic leadership encompasses a range of destructive behaviors that not only undermine employee morale and productivity but also impede organizational success. The pervasive nature of such leadership styles across various organizational levels highlights the need for a deeper understanding and proactive measures to mitigate the impact of toxic leadership in the workplace.

Impact and effects of toxic leadership

Toxic leadership represents a systematic pattern of management characterized by the deliberate intimidation, marginalization, and degradation of employees, thereby constituting a significant impediment to the organization's overall success. The degree to which individuals are impacted by such abusive supervision is not uniform, as it varies considerably across different persons. This variability in response to toxic leadership is influenced by a confluence of factors, including but not limited to, individual personality traits and specific personal circumstances (Tepper et al., 2001). The presence of systemic toxic leadership within an

organization fundamentally erodes the fundaments of organizational cohesion, leading to a deterioration of the collective workplace environment (Ashforth, 1994; Reed and Olsen, 2010). This erosion produces effects on diminishing the employee morale, reducing productivity, and an overall decline in organizational effectiveness. A finding by Tepper (2007) shows that victims become more hostile toward directives, exhibit more aggressive behavior toward colleagues, and even experience issues in their family lives. Two measures of organizational success, Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) and turnover, are both impacted by leaders' toxic behaviors and are employee-centered success measures rather than financial or production-line metrics (Koys, 2001).

In their empirical study, Goulet and Frank (2013) show that employee engagement is positively correlated with the propensity of individuals to exert additional effort in their workplace tasks. Their findings indicate a significant inverse relationship between organizational engagement and employee turnover rates, suggesting that higher levels of engagement are associated with lower turnover. Concurrently, they found a direct and positive correlation between Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) and employee engagement, as also highlighted by Blau and Boal (1987). This relationship implies that increased engagement among employees fosters a greater inclination towards OCB, characterized by discretionary behaviors that are beneficial to the organization but not explicitly recognized by formal reward systems. The implications of these findings are particularly relevant in the context of toxic leadership. The research suggests that fostering employee engagement may serve as a mitigating factor against the adverse effects of toxic leadership within organizations. Specifically, enhanced engagement could potentially buffer the negative impact of toxic leadership on both employee turnover and OCB. In environments where toxic leadership prevails, strategies aimed at increasing employee engagement could thus play a crucial role in maintaining organizational stability and performance. By bolstering engagement, organizations may not only reduce the likelihood of increased turnover but also sustain or even enhance levels of OCB, thereby countering some of the detrimental effects that toxic leadership can have on organizational dynamics and employee morale.

Leaders' behaviors are indicative and constructive of their leadership style. The frequency of negative behaviors and the leader's intent during these behaviors are also linked to the perception of leadership style (Lipman, 2005; Whicker, 1996). Toxic leaders ensure control using poisoned power, complicating the organizational structure. Toxic leaders inflate their egos and pay attention only to themselves. They diminish employees' job satisfaction and productivity with their harmful behaviors and attitudes. The phenomenon of toxic leadership is characterized by a propensity to blame others for organizational failures. This leadership style encompasses a range of abusive, illegal, and harmful behaviors, which are collectively identified as toxic (Koys, 2001). Pelletier (2010) categorizes specific leadership behaviors as toxic, including deprivation, disregard for ideas, marginalization, harassment, emotional volatility, shifting blame for personal errors onto others, threatening job stability, ridicule, dishonesty, inciting conflict among group members, and singling out individuals within a group.

While the concept of toxic leadership shares similarities with other leadership paradigms, distinct differences are evident. Ashforth (1997) introduced the notion of "petty tyranny", defined as the tendency of individuals in power to exert their authority oppressively. The petty tyranny model encompasses a range of behaviors, such as stifling initiative, belittling subordinates, self-aggrandizement, arbitrary decision-making, lack of empathy, and unjust punishment. A key distinction between toxic leaders and "petty tyrants" lies in the consistency of their behaviors; while toxic leaders typically exhibit malicious behaviors in the workplace, petty tyrants may not display these behaviors consistently.

Tepper (2000) delineated abusive supervision as encompassing both verbal and nonverbal malicious behaviors by leaders, excluding physical contact. Although such supervisory behaviors contribute to a hostile work environment that impedes creativity, loyalty, and employee well-being, they do not necessarily include characteristics of toxic leadership such as narcissism or authoritarianism.

Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstad (2007) identified destructive leadership as a systematic and repeated pattern of behavior by a leader, supervisor, or manager that contravenes the organization's ethical standards, thereby impairing and harming the organization's objectives, responsibilities, productivity, and operations. This form of leadership also encompasses physically harmful behaviors and sexual misconduct, which are not typically associated with the core behaviors of toxic leaders (Pelletier, 2010; Schmidt, 2008). Toxic leadership style poisons employees and the organization. Employees are disturbed by the harmful behaviors of toxic leaders. Toxic leaders knowingly and willfully adopt depreciative and unfavorable attitudes toward employees. Toxic leaders exhibit a hostile attitude toward employees. The poisoned behavior of toxic leaders feeds off managerial power. Toxic leaders boost their egos and pay attention only to themselves. They reduce job satisfaction and productivity in employees with their harmful behaviors and attitudes.

One of the negative effects of toxic leadership involves excessive control, leading to reduced enthusiasm, autonomy, creativity, and innovation in the workplace. Such leaders focus on self-promotion, abusive supervision, and authoritarian leadership, displaying a lack of empathy, sensitivity, and humanity.

Toxic leaders create a multifaceted work environment where they are perceived as poisoners, affecting employee cohesion and collaboration. They aim to project an image of personal success, but this success is often built to the detriment of those around them.

By violating human rights in organizations and adopting harmful behaviors, toxic leaders effectively "infect" organizational success, as these detrimental actions can lead to decreased productivity and work quality. Additionally, toxic leadership negatively impacts employees' mental and emotional well-being, leading to stress and demotivation.

To counter toxic leadership, it is essential for organizations to adopt a positive approach to leadership and promote a healthy work environment. This involves cultivating authentic and empathetic leadership, where leaders take responsibility for guiding and supporting employees, encourage collaboration, and recognize their efforts and contributions. Furthermore, providing training and personal development programs for leaders is crucial to help them develop communication, empathy, and interpersonal skills. By creating a healthy and supportive work environment, organizations can improve employee performance and, consequently, their long-term success.

Conclusion

Toxic leadership represents a critical challenge that organizations must address to safeguard their success and the well-being of their employees. This pattern of behavior, characterized by intimidation, marginalization, and degradation of subordinates, has far-reaching and detrimental effects on both individuals and the organization as a whole.

Toxic leadership is a multifaceted issue with various manifestations, from abusive supervision to destructive leadership styles. The impact of toxic leadership extends beyond the workplace, affecting employees' personal lives and their overall sense of well-being. It erodes trust, fosters a negative work environment, and diminishes employee engagement, all of which have profound consequences for organizational performance. While some individuals may be more resilient in the face of toxic leadership, its corrosive effects are undeniable. Employees subjected to toxic leadership are more likely to exhibit deviant behavior, reduced job

satisfaction, and decreased organizational citizenship behavior. These outcomes not only harm the individual but also undermine the organization's productivity and long-term success.

Addressing toxic leadership requires a multifaceted approach. Organizations must prioritize the cultivation of positive and authentic leadership styles that promote collaboration, empathy, and employee support. Leadership development programs and training should be implemented to enhance leaders' interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Creating a healthy work environment where employees feel valued, respected, and safe is paramount.

Toxic leadership is a pervasive issue that demands attention and action. Organizations that tackle this problem head-on will not only protect their employees from harm but also position themselves for sustained success in an increasingly competitive and dynamic business landscape. By fostering a culture of ethical and empathetic leadership, organizations can create a brighter and more productive future for both their employees and for themselves.

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Conflict of interest

The researchers declare no conflict of interest.

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