



**TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE TURNOVER INTENTION: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

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## TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE TURNOVER INTENTION: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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Accepted: June 5, 2022

### ABSTRACT

*In recent years, leadership related studies have been spread around the multi-disciplinary areas. New leadership models have been created. One of that model is called toxic leadership. Adversely to positive leadership styles, toxic leadership is destructive and harmful for employees and organisations. The popularization of dark leadership perspective triggered the development of toxic leadership model. This paper reviewed the interaction between toxic leadership and employee turnover intention. Firstly, it is looked at the concepts of toxic leadership as well as turnover intention. The paper also discussed the manifestations of toxic leadership, effects of toxic leadership and the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention. The paper concluded that negative attitudes and behaviors of Toxic Leaders leads to many negative outputs in the workplace, not only by means of the decreasing organizational commitment but also the decreasing workplace performance of employees. The study also showed that toxic managers do not realize their toxicity of themselves. They mostly focus on their up-to-date success while ignoring their long-term and permanent harm on the employees.*

**Keywords:** Toxic Leadership, Abusive Supervision, Turnover Intention, Authoritarian leadership, Narcissism

**CITATION:** Ogbonda, E. H., & Amadi, G. (2022). Toxic leadership and employee turnover intention: A conceptual review. *The Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management*, 9 (2), 1418 -1429.

### INTRODUCTION

Of all resources in any organization, human resources plays an important role in the organization's ability to grow and continuously evolve. The success of any firms is dependent upon the collection of individuals; leaders and followers, and the amount of effort both the leaders and followers put into it. Therefore, organizational leadership is often regarded as the most important factor in the success and failure of the organization. Leadership has to do with the active use of a

person's ability, and talents towards influencing others in the achievement of common or preconceived goals. Organizational leadership is important as a result of its all-embracing effects on the accomplishment of objectives, policies, and programmes. Therefore, the role of leadership in organizations is to co-ordinate the activities and aspirations of members as followers (Mohammed &Orunbon, 2020).

Ideally, leadership–followership relationships in organizations should be filled with rewards, sense

of belonging, freedom in job operations, showing of recognition, and competency for both parties. Despite that, for a follower, this relationship may also form the basis for maltreatment, abuse, and punishment, accompanied by follower's feelings of frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, and displeasure. Therefore, toxic leadership is a combination of self-centred attitudes, motivations and behaviours that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organisation, and mission performance. According to Mohammed and Orunbon, (2020), the toxic leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organisation, which leads to short and long term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviour to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves. The toxic leader completes short term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfil requests. Prolonged use of toxic leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative and potential and destroys unit morale (Reed, 2004).

However, given that followers are an essential part of the leadership equation without the required followers, becoming a befitting leader is difficult. In the popular parlance "he who thinks he leads, but has no followers, is only taking a walk". Followers impact leaders and the leadership process. Followers provide the 'horsepower' to organisational performance and productivity as they are the primary contributors to the success of any organisational outcomes. People display followership when they express, through their words or actions, respect and support for a person they view as their leader, and openness to be influenced by him or her in that capacity. One could argue that any good leader is in turn a good follower (Bennis, 2010).

Employees can thus serve as an effective process in harnessing organisational change, as effective

followers impact the adaptive culture of an organisation through both challenging and supporting leaders (Chaleff, 2008). In essence, followership impacts on leadership and hence on the organisational process as well as organisational output and productivity. The performance of a corporate organisation, which determines its survival and growth, depends to a large extent on the productivity of its workforce and their turnover intention either to stay or leave. Indeed, the wealth of the nation as well as socio-economic well-being of its people depends on the effectiveness and efficiency of its various subcomponents (Yesufu, 2000). Labour is generally regarded as the most dynamic of all the factors that are employed for the creation of wealth, having the potential to energize and serve as a catalyst to all the other resources (Yesufu, 2000). Productivity is thus of fundamental importance to the individual worker of whatever status, to the organisation whether commercial or not and to the national economy at large and, accordingly, therefore, to the upliftment of the welfare of the citizen and the reduction if not total eradication of mass poverty (Yesufu, 2000; Akinyele, 2010).

In organizations, employees work hand in hand with managers both parties are expected to work toward accomplishing organizational goals. Leadership role in the organization is therefore crucial to the attainment of goals, aims and objectives of the organization. Thus, leadership has become a priority in industries globally and plays a key role in improving outcomes by influencing the motivation and productivity of workforce. Moreover, ineffective (or poor) leadership must be viewed as not merely a lack of positive behaviours, but also a display of specifically destructive behaviours (Toor & Ogunlana, 2009). It could be observed that research on required leadership behaviours has enabled leaders to attempt to adapt and align their behaviour to reflect frequently accepted leadership qualities. Such alignment, although influenced heavily by positive and constructive leadership research, thereby looks down upon the lessons and

opportunities that may be generated by research on the side of leadership such as toxic leadership behaviour.

Reference to the literature review, destructive and negative modified leadership models are listed as; abusive leadership, poor leadership, evil leadership, ineffective leadership, bad leadership, dark leadership, authoritarian leadership, ignorant leadership, toxic leadership, egotistic leadership and cruel leadership. These leadership models generally damage the followers, subordinates and employee's job outcomes. Toxic leadership decreases employee's motivation, creativity, satisfaction, productivity, commitment, performance while increases intention to leave, health problems, stress and burn out (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Kellerman, 2004; Liu, Liao & Loi, 2012; Aboassin & Abood, 2013; İzgüden, Eroymak & Erdem, 2016; Burns, 2017). This paper is aimed at determine the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention of employees.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Toxic Leaders/Leadership

The term "toxic leader" first appeared in 1996 (Wicker, 1996), but as yet no standard definition of toxic leadership exists. Nevertheless, toxic leadership is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in today's world, affecting both private and public organisations and individuals in all fields of social life, from business, education and politics to various other domains of action (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). Therefore, term toxic leader refers to leaders who display five specific characteristics, which are: Self-promotion, Abusive supervision, Unpredictability, Narcissism and Authoritarian leadership (Schmidt, 2008). Toxicity in the workplace is created when followers feel bullied, harassed, or abused. The actions of the toxic leaders in organizations are identified as creating situations where the followers complain about a negative atmosphere working under the leaders who suppress them, abuse them, and harass them. These leaders may use inappropriate methods of

causing the followers to believe they are forced into actions that they may not normally execute. Toxic leadership behaviour reflects the noticeable absence of effective and authentic leadership quality among school leaders which includes phenomenon like managerial incompetence and managerial misconduct.

Toxic leadership comprises five dimensions: (1) **Abusive supervision** refers to a leader's perceived intentionally hostile behaviours towards employees (Dobbs, 2014; Schmidt, 2014), excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2007); (2) **Authoritarian leadership** attempts to exert excessive authority and control over subordinates (Dobbs, 2014) in such a way that the leaders ultimately control all the work (Schmidt, 2014); (3) **Narcissism** points to a style driven by arrogance and self-absorption, where self-orientated actions are designed to enhance the self (Dobbs, 2014) but often fails to follow company policies whilst expecting it of employees (Schmidt, 2014); (4) **Self-promotion** advertises their accomplishments and also take credit for others' work (Dobbs, 2014), blame others and deflect responsibility for mistakes (Schmidt, 2014); and (5) **Unpredictability**: through their actions, they keep subordinates afraid and watchful (Dobbs, 2014). These leaders act differently when their superiors are around (Schmidt, 2008), and their consistently unpredictable actions eventually cause their subordinates to give up, feeling helpless and powerless to protect themselves (Schmidt, 2014).

Toxic leaders are the first factor involved when discussing workplace toxicity. This is due to leadership's role and responsibility in modeling desired behavior to followers and establishing the kind of culture the business wishes to maintain (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013). In other words, followers take their cues from leaders (Padilla et al., 2007). If a leader portrays toxic behavior, such as being unethical in their dealings or showing favoritism to some employees while bullying others, highly susceptible followers will begin to portray similar behaviors (Baronce, 2015; Eisenbeiß &

Brodbeck, 2013). For example, workers unwilling to behave unethically may then face marginalization or victimization by the followers and leaders promoting said behavior, or they will begin to withdraw from participating in the company (Hayes, Douglas, & Bonner, 2015; Jha & Jha, 2015).

Elle (2012) defined toxic leadership as contagious, far-reaching, and insidious. Jowers (2015) concurred, citing an Army wife, stating that the effects of toxic leadership flow into the marriage and home life of those who experience toxic leadership. Toxic leaders, according to Elle, do not add value to the organizations they lead; rather, they have a negative impact on unit climate, erode unit cohesion and deflate esprit de corps. They cause unnecessary organizational stress, emphasize negative values and create an environment of hopelessness.

Boddy (2015) found that workplace outcomes with a psychopathic CEO in charge included staff withdraw, higher turnover rates, and bullying. Such employee withdrawal or turnover may lead to lower creativity, productivity, and innovation in a company, thereby negatively influencing its profits and competitiveness in its industry (Boddy, 2015; Tsai, Horng, Liu, & Hu, 2015). In addition, researchers have related employee withdrawal and turnover to the increased stress workers often experience when working with a toxic leader (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016). To deal with the anxiety caused by worrying about the erratic nature of their leader or needing to work harder due to incompetent leaders, workers can either opt to leave their current workplace entirely or stop putting in their best work to avoid additional exposure to their leader (Cotton, 2016; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016).

### **Manifestations of Toxic Leadership**

A leader can display toxicity in numerous ways. Hadadian and Zarei (2016), Green (2014), and Mathieu et al. (2014) found leaders with narcissistic qualities could develop toxicity in a workplace. Any leader who either uses their position for self-promotion to *save* the organization (through the

overt or latent idea that their superior knowledge or abilities are the only way a company will succeed) or undermines others or the company can create a toxic work environment (Bell, 2017; Boddy, 2014; Cotton, 2016). While narcissism and self-promotion may not inherently constitute added stress for workers, these elements are often combined with unpredictability, authoritarian leadership styles, and abusive supervision, all of which can lead to stress and anxiety, thereby creating a toxic work environment.

Leaders can be toxic if they are incompetent or unsuited for their job or leadership role (Green, 2014). In this case, workers who see their leaders' inabilities may lose respect for them, thereby undermining not only their leaders but also the organizational structure (Fischbacher-Smith, 2015). Workers may be angry at having to work under a toxic leader (Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014). Continued worker animosity toward their leaders can encourage a toxic work environment and can extend to workers' family and social circles if they cannot express their anger in a positive way in the work environment (Jha & Jha, 2015; Mathieu et al., 2014). Researchers have noted that unethical dealings, a lack of trust between leaders and workers, and a failure to consider worker wellbeing or concerns equated to toxic leadership (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013; Maxwell, 2015; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014).

Leonard (2014) noted that the dynamic between leaders and their followers was critical in the toxicity of a work environment. Leaders with a *bad* relationship with their followers would perpetuate a toxic environment, while the converse was also true, where leaders with positive relationships with their followers perpetuated happier and healthier environments (Fischbacher-Smith, 2015; Leonard, 2014; Tse & Chiu, 2014). While unhealthy dynamics may first derive from workers, leaders who do not work to rectify worker negativity will encourage the toxic environment (Cotton, 2016; Moore, Coe, Adams, Conlon, & Sargeant, 2015). Leaders and future leaders must have training in ways in which

to deal with toxic followers, alternatives to authoritarian leadership styles, and undo toxic cultures (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Hurlburt, 2015).

Toxic leadership can be unintentional or can arise from good intentions (Cotton, 2016; Fraher, 2016). Leaders may enter a struggling department and wish to fix the issues swiftly by employing specific skills and knowledge, or leaders may work in a high-stress environment that requires immediate and decisive action, which can lead to relying on their abilities before wasting time incorporating their workers in the situation (Cotton, 2016; Fraher, 2016). In these cases, the toxic leader wishes to provide aid; in the process, they unwittingly undermine their workers (Fraher, 2016). Prolonged undermining may then lead to worker resentment or withdrawal, thereby perpetuating a cycle of workplace toxicity (Fischbacher-Smith, 2015; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). Toxic leadership can also be found in any organization and across any culture or another demographic factor (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013; Schmidt, 2014; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). Woestman and Wasonga (2015) found that toxic leadership was often evident in schools and across different levels of school leadership, like principals, department heads and school governing bodies. In particular, toxic leadership behavior, such as discrimination and aggression, was demonstrated in the principal-teacher dynamic, especially relating to principals, who were predominantly male and their female staff (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). This finding showed instances of micro-aggression perpetrated at the leader-worker level, which could lead to both increased worker distress and a company culture of acceptance of microaggression (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014).

Schmidt (2014) also highlighted ways in which the military often reported cases of toxic leadership. Much of toxic leadership, such as abusive supervision and authoritarian leadership styles, derives from the idea of breaking and building soldiers in the military leadership context (Wright, 2015). Schmidt (2014) highlighted how military

personnel in both low-stress like home life and high stress or active combat situations were still negatively influenced by toxic leadership through high degrees of personal stress, lack of group cohesion and trust, and overall lower levels of job satisfaction. These findings indicated the idea that toxic leadership was influenced by organizational culture and workers (O'Hara, 2015). One should strategize to mitigate the negative effects of toxic leadership, thereby building stronger, more competitive companies, with a healthy and productive workforce (Jha & Jha, 2015; Schmidt, 2014).

### **Effects of Toxic Leadership**

Lipman-Blumen (2005) posits that a toxic management style can drastically impede a subordinate's drive, imagination, contentment, productivity, and their performance overall. It also heightens levels of stress, anxiousness, increases health issues, and increases the probability that they will choose to leave the organisation (Kellerman, 2004). This is supported by Davenport et al (2005), who argues that in addition to mental health issues such as anxiety and stress, persons suffering from workplace related stress can also suffer from sleep disorders such as nightmares and insomnia.

Toxic leaders can negatively influence a worker's ability to think critically or effectively problem-solve (Bell, 2017). Toxic leaders who do not seek their followers' wellbeing and attempt to deal with problems in a healthy, effective manner cannot demonstrate such positive behavior for their workers to follow (Fischbacher-Smith, 2015; Jha & Jha, 2015). Workers subjected to toxic leadership may become afraid to voice their opinions or solutions due to potential backlash from their toxic leader (Peng, Schaubroeck, & Li, 2014). Leaders should attempt to counter such toxicity by providing workers with an environment where their voices will be heard and respected (Hewlett, 2016). The real or perceived leader backlash to voicing concerns or providing alternatives often derives from workers experiencing leaders authoritarian or

taking a fundamentalist “my way or the highway” approach to projects and management (Cotton, 2016; Padilla et al., 2007). Such fear and lack of positive leader-member exchanges can also negatively influence overall department or company performance, as well as continue the toxic cycle in the workplace (Bell, 2017; Peng et al., 2014).

### **Effects on the Individual**

When an individual in command displays abusive behaviours, for example jeering, shouting, and making threats against their subordinates, it can be considered emotional abuse (Keashly, 2001). This corresponds with the findings of Barling Rogers, and Kelloway (2001), who argue that the executive role of the aggressor can exaggerate the impact that this abuse will have on a subordinate. In addition to this, Dekker & Barling (1998) contend that an aggressor in an authoritative position can be led to feel a sense of invincibility, which can in turn increase the probability of them taking part in these toxic and abusive behaviours. It is argued, however, by Price (2005) that this is not the case; toxic managers do in fact understand what is accepted as normal human behaviour, and simply do not believe that these standard behaviours apply to them, willingly acting in a way which they know to be wrong, yet justifying this by giving themselves an exception on the basis of their status as managers.

According to Hillard (2009), the effects of toxic management and mobbing were like each other, and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including severe depression, psychotic episodes, insomnia, trauma tremors, selective mutism, and an inability to adjust. The mental impact of this kind of toxic workplace were comparable to the mental effects experienced by people who have experienced war or prison and can result in long-term substance abuse disorders such as alcohol addiction.

Additionally, friendships and relationships will often also suffer from the lingering effects of workplace trauma, and the victims may have severe difficulties recovering, and may die of suicide, with

approximately 15% of all suicides in Sweden being likely the direct result of trauma from toxic management and hostile work environments (Hillard, 2009).

### **Effects on the Organisation**

Subordinates gravitate towards an increase in health problems, as well as intention to leave, parallel to decreased feelings of job satisfaction, motivation, and loyalty to the organisation (Schmidt, 2014). It is posited by Reed and Bullis (2009) that this can correspond with an increase in overall staff turnover inside the organisational framework. Between the loss of efficiency by besieged subordinates, and cost of training an influx of new staff, companies are bearing costs of up to \$14,000 per employee each year (Michigan State University, 2016).

In addition to this, Davenport, Elliott, and Schwartz, (2005) argues that toxic managerial environments and mobbing typically occurs in workplaces which have a lack of organisation and controls in their production and practices, and often have inept management at upper levels. Therefore, Davenport et al (2005), suggests that the victims are often targeted due to them being exceptional, intelligent, competent, creative and showcasing integrity and dedication to their work.

This is contrasted by Harper (2013), however, who challenges the idea, arguing that while this can often be the case, it is just as likely to see individuals being targeted by their peers due to their lack of productivity, causing others to resent them, and begin a campaign of mobbing behaviour in order to force them to vacate their positions. Managers, on the other hand, are more likely to choose to victimise capable subordinates, because they feel threatened by their accomplishments and abilities (Davenport, et al., 2005).

### **Conceptualization of Turnover Intention**

Many scholars have defined the concept of turnover in many ways. For example, Price in 2005 describes turnover as the degree of movement across the membership division of an organisation.

On the other hand, Mobley in 1982 defines employee turnover as the discontinuance of membership in an organisation from an individual who received monetary compensation from the organisation. Also, Tracey in 1991 sees labour turnover as the changes in the composition of the workforce due to termination. A frequently used distinction of employee turnover from an organization is between voluntary and involuntary; voluntary employees-initiated decision is to leave the organization on their own; while instinctive organization-initiated choice is an employer's decision to terminate the employee, plus death or mandatory retirement (Dess and Shaw, 2001), Similarly (Xiancheng, 2010) argues that voluntary turnover begins by employees wanting to leave for specific reasons, while involuntary turnover is an employee going the organization because the organization is downsizing or cost saving, or due to employee's poor performance.

### **The Relationship between Toxic Leadership and Turnover Intention**

Toxic leadership is negatively related with motivation and commitment of employees while it is positively correlated with high turnover and intention to leave behaviours of employees (Reed & Bullis, 2009). Health problems of employees increase with toxic leaders behaviours even as their performance, job satisfaction and organisational commitment tend to decrease (Schmindt, 2008, 2014). Anxiety, unhappiness, loss of motivation, stress, distractibility, desperateness, isolation, deviation, alienation, lack of confidence and compunction are some of the psychosocial impacts of bad/destructive/toxic/harmful/dark leadership styles over employees-subordinates-follower-peers. Sleeplessness, weakness, nuisance, fatigue, dermatological and ergonomic health problems are also related with toxic leadership behaviours (Başar, Sığrı & Basım, 2016).

Toxic leadership represents patterns of behavior that intentionally intimidate, marginalize and degrade employees, and threaten the organization's success. The degree to which

employees are ill affected by abusive supervision varies from person to person. Many factors influence one's response to toxicity such as personality and individual situation (Tepper, Duffy & Shaw, 2001). Systemic toxic leadership undermines organizational cohesion (Reed & Olsen, 2010). Interestingly, Tepper (2007) found that victims become more resistant to direction on the job, show more aggressive behavior to fellow employees, and even experience problems in their family life. Two measures of organizational success: organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and turnover are both affected by toxic leader behaviors, and they are success measures that focus on employees instead of financials or production line activity (Koys, 2001).

Goulet and Frank (2013) found that commitment is associated with people giving greater effort to work activities. There is an inverse relationship between organizational commitment and turnover, and a direct relationship between OCB and commitment (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky, 2002). This may suggest that nonprofit employees' commitment could influence the effect of toxic leadership, lessening the effect it has on turnover and OCB (Goulet & Frank, 2013).

### **CONCLUSION**

Toxic leadership can and should be universally recognised as a unique set of destructive behaviours or characteristics that negatively impact the subordinate group in a predictable and intentional way (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Toxic leadership manifested through abusive supervisors have been identified to negatively affect the organizational commitment, satisfaction and justice which ultimately increase employees' intent to leave (Tepper, Duffy, Henle & Lambert, 2006; Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Chen, Lin and Lien (2011) and Zeffane and Melhem (2017) argued that employees tend to leave their employers when they are dissatisfied and stressed, and as already established a toxic supervisor makes employees unhappy and their lives difficult.



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