

The Role of Leadership in Mitigating Toxic Workplace Culture: A Critical Examination of Effective Interventions



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A B S T R A C T

Toxic workplace culture, characterized by negative behaviors such as poor communication, lack of trust, and unethical conduct, poses significant challenges to organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Leadership plays a pivotal role in either perpetuating or mitigating these toxic environments. This article critically examines the role of leadership in addressing toxic workplace culture, focusing on effective interventions that leaders can implement to transform negative work environments into positive and productive spaces. The study highlights how different leadership styles, particularly transformational and ethical leadership, are instrumental in fostering a culture of accountability, open communication, and ethical behavior. It also explores the importance of leadership interventions such as establishing clear organizational values, implementing conflict resolution mechanisms, and promoting continuous learning and development. However, the study also acknowledges the challenges leaders face, including resistance to change, deeply entrenched toxic behaviors, and external pressures that may undermine efforts to create a positive work environment. The findings suggest that while leadership is crucial in mitigating toxicity, success depends on sustained commitment, adaptability, and the ability to navigate complex organizational dynamics. By prioritizing ethical leadership and fostering a culture of inclusion and respect, organizations can effectively combat toxic workplace culture and promote long-term organizational health and success. This research contributes to the broader understanding of the critical role of leadership in shaping workplace culture and provides practical insights for leaders seeking to address and prevent toxicity in their organizations.



1. Introduction

Toxic workplace culture has become a pressing issue in organizations worldwide, with significant implications for employee well-being, productivity, and overall organizational success. A toxic work environment is characterized by dysfunctional behaviors, poor communication, lack of trust, and negative interpersonal relationships, which collectively contribute to high levels of stress, low morale, and increased turnover rates among employees (Frost, 2003). The pervasive nature of toxic workplace culture not only hampers individual performance but also poses substantial risks to the organization's reputation and financial health (Housman & Minor, 2015). Given these consequences, understanding how to effectively mitigate toxic workplace culture has become an urgent priority for both scholars and practitioners.

Despite the recognition of toxic workplace culture as a critical issue, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the specific role that leadership plays in addressing and mitigating this problem. While existing studies have explored the general impact of leadership on organizational culture, there is limited research that critically examines the direct interventions that leaders can implement to transform toxic environments into positive and productive workplaces (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Moreover, much of the literature focuses on identifying the characteristics of toxic leadership itself, rather than investigating how effective leadership can counteract and prevent toxicity within an organization (Kellerman, 2004). This gap in the literature suggests the need for a more targeted exploration of leadership strategies that can actively combat toxic workplace culture.

The urgency of this research is further underscored by the growing prevalence of toxic workplaces, particularly in the context of

increasing workplace stress and mental health concerns among employees. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, as remote work and economic uncertainty have heightened stress levels and strained workplace relationships (Kniffin et al., 2021). In this context, effective leadership is more crucial than ever in fostering a healthy work environment and ensuring organizational resilience. Without proactive leadership interventions, organizations risk perpetuating a cycle of toxicity that can lead to long-term damage to employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011).

Previous research has highlighted several leadership behaviors and practices that can contribute to a positive organizational culture, such as transformational leadership, ethical leadership, and servant leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown & Treviño, 2006). These leadership styles are associated with fostering trust, encouraging open communication, and promoting ethical behavior within organizations, all of which are essential in mitigating toxic workplace culture (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the general benefits of positive leadership, they often lack a specific focus on the mechanisms through which leaders can address and reverse existing toxicity in the workplace. This presents an opportunity to explore more detailed and practical interventions that leaders can employ to tackle toxic culture directly.

The novelty of this study lies in its critical examination of the specific leadership interventions that are most effective in mitigating toxic workplace culture. By focusing on practical strategies and real-world examples, this research aims to bridge the gap between theoretical leadership models and their application in combating workplace toxicity.



The study will also explore the role of leadership in not only addressing existing toxic cultures but also in preventing the emergence of toxicity through proactive management practices.

The primary purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the leadership interventions that can effectively mitigate toxic workplace culture. By doing so, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for leaders and organizations seeking to create healthier and more productive work environments. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on leadership and organizational culture, offering both theoretical insights and practical tools for addressing one of the most pervasive challenges in modern workplaces.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a literature review approach to critically examine the role of leadership in mitigating toxic workplace culture. A literature review is an appropriate method for this research as it allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarly work and the identification of effective leadership interventions based on past studies (Snyder, 2019). By reviewing a wide range of academic sources, this study aims to gather insights into the leadership strategies that have been found to be successful in addressing and preventing workplace toxicity.

The sources of data for this study include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, industry reports, and case studies that focus on leadership, organizational culture, and toxic workplace environments. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the topic, the rigor of their methodologies, and their contribution to the broader understanding of leadership's impact on organizational culture. The selection criteria ensured the inclusion of

diverse perspectives, encompassing both theoretical frameworks and practical examples of leadership interventions in various organizational contexts (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

Data collection was conducted through systematic searches in academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. Keywords such as "leadership," "toxic workplace culture," "organizational culture," "leadership interventions," and "workplace toxicity" were used to identify relevant literature. The search was refined by applying inclusion criteria, such as the publication date (focusing on studies published within the last two decades) and the credibility of the sources. Seminal works that have significantly influenced the field were also included, regardless of their publication date, to provide a historical perspective on the evolution of leadership practices (Kitchenham, 2004).

For data analysis, the study employs thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly suited to qualitative research as it allows for a detailed examination of recurring themes and concepts across different studies, providing insights into the common leadership practices that have been effective in mitigating toxic workplace culture. The analysis process involved coding the data, grouping similar concepts together, and interpreting the findings in the context of existing leadership theories and frameworks (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

In conclusion, this study's methodological approach, which combines a literature review with thematic analysis, provides a robust framework for exploring the role of leadership in addressing toxic workplace culture. By synthesizing existing research, the study aims to offer practical recommendations for leaders



and organizations seeking to create healthier and more productive work environments.

3. Result and Discussion

Below is a table of the literature review findings related to "The Role of Leadership in Mitigating Toxic Workplace Culture: A Critical Examination of Effective Interventions." This table summarizes key studies, their methodologies, and the main findings.

Author(s) and Year	Title	Methodology	Key Findings
Frost, P. J. (2003)	Toxic Emotions at Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict	Qualitative Case Studies	Identified the role of compassionate leadership in addressing and managing toxic emotions within organizations.
Einarsen, S., Aasland, M. S., & Skogstad, A. (2007)	Destructive Leadership Behaviour: A Definition and Conceptual Model	Theoretical Review and Conceptual Modeling	Proposed a model of destructive leadership and its impact on creating and sustaining toxic workplace cultures.
Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006)	Transformational Leadership	Literature Review	Demonstrated how transformational leadership can positively influence workplace culture and reduce toxicity by promoting trust and open communication.
Kellerman, B. (2004)	Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters	Qualitative Analysis and Case Studies	Explored the characteristics of toxic leadership and its detrimental effects on organizational culture.
Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006)	Ethical Leadership: A Review and Future Directions	Literature Review	Discussed the importance of ethical leadership in fostering a culture of accountability and mitigating toxic behaviors in the workplace.
Housman, M., & Minor, D. (2015)	Toxic Workers	Empirical Research	Examined the financial impact of toxic employees on organizations and highlighted the role of leadership in preventing and managing toxic behaviors.
Harms, P. D., Spain, S. M., & Hannah, S. T. (2011)	Leader Development and the Dark Side of Personality	Theoretical Analysis	Analyzed how certain personality traits in leaders can contribute to toxic workplace culture and suggested interventions for mitigating these effects.
Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005)	Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership	Theoretical Review	Emphasized the role of authentic leadership in creating a positive work environment and countering toxic workplace culture.
Skogstad, A., Einarsen, S., Torsheim, T., Aasland, M. S., & Hetland, H. (2007)	The Destructiveness of Laissez-Faire Leadership Behavior	Empirical Study	Highlighted the negative impact of laissez-faire leadership on workplace culture, leading to the emergence of toxic behaviors.
Samnani, A.-K. (2021)	The Role and Impact of Leaders on Workplace Bullying, Emotional Abuse and Harassment	Theoretical Review	Explores broader forms of leadership, such as human resource management (HRM), the organization and policy, for the role that these can have in enabling or deterring bullying.



This table organizes the major findings of the literature on leadership and toxic workplace culture, offering a concise overview of different perspectives and empirical results that inform how leadership can effectively intervene to address and prevent toxicity within organizations.

Discussion of the Result

3.1. Understanding Toxic Workplace Culture

Toxic workplace culture is characterized by an environment where negative behaviors such as bullying, favoritism, poor communication, and lack of trust are prevalent. These behaviors not only diminish employee morale but also lead to high turnover rates, reduced productivity, and overall organizational dysfunction (Frost, 2003). The literature consistently highlights that toxic cultures are often perpetuated by leadership styles that either contribute to or fail to address the underlying issues (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Leaders who exhibit authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership styles, for instance, may inadvertently encourage or overlook toxic behaviors, thereby allowing a toxic culture to flourish (Kellerman, 2004).

Indicators a toxic workplace culture;

1. Poor communication (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard,2007). Poor communication is one of the main "toxins" in the workplace that can poison organizational culture.
2. Poor leadership (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser,2007). Destructive leaders as one of the key elements in creating a toxic work environment.
3. Excessive workload (Britt et al.,2016). Excessive workload can affect employee resilience and contribute to an unhealthy work environment.
4. Lack of recognition and appreciation (Kusy & Holloway,2009) Lack of recognition and

appreciation can contribute to toxicity.

5. Bullying and harassment (Sutton (2007) The impact of abusive behavior and harassment in the workplace can trigger a toxic work environment
6. Favoritism and injustice (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard,2007) Favoritism and injustice as toxins in the workplace that can damage organizational culture.
7. Lack of development opportunities (Kusy & Holloway,2009) This lack of development opportunities for employees can contribute to a toxic work environment.
8. High interpersonal conflict (Sutton,2007) Unresolved interpersonal conflicts can create a toxic work environment.
9. Work-life imbalance (Britt et al. (2016) work-life balance in maintaining employee resilience and preventing a toxic work environment.
10. Distrust and suspicion (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser,2007) Distrust can be part of an environment conducive to toxic leadership.

The impact of toxic workplace culture on organizational outcomes cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that toxic cultures lead to significant financial losses due to decreased employee engagement, higher absenteeism, and increased healthcare costs associated with stress-related illnesses (Housman & Minor, 2015). Furthermore, toxic cultures erode trust and collaboration among employees, which are essential for innovation and effective teamwork (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Gilin, 2009). This creates a vicious cycle where the negative effects of toxicity further entrench the culture, making it increasingly difficult to break the cycle without intentional leadership intervention.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in either exacerbating or mitigating the effects of toxic workplace culture. Effective leaders are not



only aware of the signs of toxicity but also take proactive steps to address and reverse these behaviors (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011). This requires a deep understanding of organizational dynamics and the willingness to implement difficult changes, including holding accountable those who contribute to the toxic environment. The literature suggests that leadership intervention is one of the most critical factors in transforming a toxic culture into a positive, productive work environment (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

3.2. Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Toxicity

Different leadership styles have varying effects on the development and perpetuation of toxic workplace cultures. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiring and motivating employees to achieve their full potential, has been widely recognized for its ability to foster a positive organizational culture (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders focus on building strong relationships with their employees, encouraging open communication, and promoting a shared vision for the organization. These behaviors are instrumental in creating a supportive work environment that mitigates the risk of toxicity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Conversely, authoritarian leadership, which is marked by a top-down, command-and-control approach, often contributes to the development of toxic workplace cultures (Einarsen et al., 2007). Authoritarian leaders tend to suppress open communication, discourage employee autonomy, and focus on strict compliance with rules and procedures. This style can create an environment of fear and resentment, where employees are less likely to report unethical behavior or voice concerns about workplace issues (Kellerman, 2004). As a result, toxic behaviors may go

unchecked, further entrenching the negative culture within the organization.

Another leadership style that can impact workplace culture is laissez-faire leadership, where leaders take a hands-off approach and allow employees to manage themselves with minimal oversight. While this style may work in highly autonomous, high-performing teams, it can also lead to a lack of direction and accountability, which are fertile grounds for toxic behaviors to emerge (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). In the absence of strong leadership, negative behaviors such as bullying and favoritism can go unchecked, leading to a toxic work environment that is difficult to reverse.

The literature underscores the importance of adopting a leadership style that aligns with the organization's goals and values while actively preventing the emergence of toxic behaviors. Leaders must be vigilant in identifying early signs of toxicity and take decisive action to address them before they become entrenched in the organization's culture (Brown & Treviño, 2006). This involves not only changing leadership behaviors but also implementing organizational policies and practices that promote a positive, inclusive, and respectful work environment.

3.3. Effective Leadership Interventions

Effective leadership interventions are crucial for mitigating toxic workplace culture. One of the most important interventions is the establishment of clear organizational values and ethical standards that guide employee behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders must not only communicate these values but also model them in their daily interactions with employees. This creates a culture of accountability where toxic behaviors are not tolerated, and ethical behavior is rewarded. Research shows that organizations with strong



ethical leadership are more likely to have positive workplace cultures and lower levels of toxicity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Another critical intervention is the development and implementation of comprehensive conflict resolution and reporting mechanisms. Leaders must ensure that employees feel safe and supported in reporting toxic behaviors without fear of retaliation (Einarsen et al., 2007). This can be achieved by creating anonymous reporting systems, providing training on conflict resolution, and ensuring that all complaints are taken seriously and addressed promptly. Effective conflict resolution not only addresses toxic behaviors but also prevents them from escalating and spreading within the organization (Leiter et al., 2009).

Leadership development and training programs are also essential for equipping leaders with the skills they need to effectively manage and mitigate toxic workplace cultures. These programs should focus on building emotional intelligence, communication skills, and conflict management abilities (Harms et al., 2011). By investing in leadership development, organizations can ensure that their leaders are prepared to identify and address toxic behaviors early on, preventing them from becoming deeply rooted in the organizational culture (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Finally, leaders must be proactive in fostering a positive work environment by recognizing and rewarding positive behaviors. This includes celebrating team successes, acknowledging individual contributions, and promoting a culture of collaboration and mutual respect (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Positive reinforcement not only boosts employee morale but also reinforces the organizational values that are essential for maintaining a healthy work environment. Leaders who actively engage in these practices

are more likely to create a resilient, positive workplace culture that is resistant to toxicity (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

3.4. Challenges and Limitations of Leadership Interventions

While leadership interventions are critical in mitigating toxic workplace culture, they are not without challenges and limitations. One of the primary challenges is the deeply entrenched nature of toxic cultures, which can be resistant to change even in the presence of strong leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007). In organizations where toxicity has been allowed to flourish for an extended period, employees may be skeptical of leadership efforts to initiate change, viewing them as superficial or insincere. This resistance can undermine the effectiveness of leadership interventions and make it difficult to achieve lasting cultural transformation (Harms et al., 2011).

Another challenge is the potential for leadership interventions to be perceived as punitive rather than supportive. If employees view interventions such as conflict resolution processes or ethical training as mechanisms for punishment rather than tools for positive change, they may be less likely to engage with these initiatives (Leiter et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of framing leadership interventions in a way that emphasizes their role in creating a supportive and inclusive work environment, rather than merely enforcing compliance (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Leadership interventions also require a sustained commitment from the organization's leadership team. Transforming a toxic workplace culture is not a one-time effort but an ongoing process that requires continuous monitoring, feedback, and adjustment (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders must be willing to dedicate the necessary resources, time, and energy to drive this



change, even in the face of setbacks and challenges. Without sustained leadership commitment, efforts to mitigate toxicity are unlikely to be successful in the long term (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Finally, the effectiveness of leadership interventions can be limited by external factors such as industry norms, economic pressures, and regulatory environments. For example, in industries where aggressive or competitive behaviors are the norm, efforts to promote a more collaborative and inclusive culture may be met with resistance from employees who perceive these changes as incompatible with industry expectations (Kellerman, 2004). Similarly, economic pressures that prioritize short-term results over long-term cultural health can undermine leadership efforts to create a positive work environment (Housman & Minor, 2015). Addressing these challenges requires leaders to navigate complex organizational dynamics and external pressures while maintaining a focus on the long-term goal of creating a healthy, sustainable workplace culture.

4. Conclusion

The role of leadership in mitigating toxic workplace culture is both critical and complex. Effective leadership interventions, such as establishing clear organizational values, implementing robust conflict resolution mechanisms, and fostering a positive work environment, are essential in addressing and transforming toxic cultures. Leaders who actively model ethical behavior, engage in open communication, and promote a culture of accountability are more likely to succeed in creating a healthy and productive workplace. However, the challenges of deeply entrenched toxic behaviors, resistance to change, and external pressures can complicate these efforts, requiring leaders to demonstrate sustained commitment and adaptability.

Ultimately, the success of leadership interventions in mitigating toxic workplace culture depends on the ability of leaders to navigate these challenges while maintaining a focus on long-term cultural transformation. By prioritizing ethical leadership, continuous improvement, and the well-being of employees, organizations can create a resilient culture that not only prevents the emergence of toxicity but also promotes overall organizational health and success. This research highlights the importance of leadership in shaping workplace culture and provides valuable insights into the strategies that can be employed to foster a positive and inclusive work environment.

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