

Dark Clouds of Leadership: The Causes and Consequences of Toxic Leadership on
Followers

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Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

Word count: 1996

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Abstract

Despite the depth of literature on dark-side leadership and its effects on followers, there needs to be more research, particularly on toxic leadership. Recent studies have highlighted the detrimental consequences of toxic leadership, a familiar reality in many organisations, societies, and countries. Indeed, history is replete with examples of leaders who used their positions of power to indulge individual desires. Toxic leadership is becoming increasingly prevalent in organisations, despite the \$45.5 billion spent on education for leaders globally (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). Toxic leadership has been associated with follower deviant behaviours, dissatisfaction, and poor organisational performance. Therefore, this article critically examines toxic leadership research to provide a comprehensive catalogue of toxic leadership. Second, we explore the consequences of toxic leadership holistically from various geographical contexts, highlighting its effects on followers and organisational health. Lastly, we offer concluding views and an agenda for future directions in the toxic leadership realm.

Keywords:

Dark side leadership, toxic leadership, power, follower deviant behaviour

1. Introduction

Decades of studies have demonstrated the significance of leadership to workplace success. Specifically, leadership emerges from the interaction of an actor's drive and capacity to lead and followers' desire for guidance and authority. Recently, emerging interest in dysfunctional leadership facet shows a substantial paradigm shift that recognises the detrimental consequences that leaders confer on followers. Dysfunctional leadership in corporate organisations (Rasool, et al., 2021), government (Hattab, et al., 2022), education (Green, 2014; Orunbon, et al., 2022; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020), as well as the political spheres (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021), have rekindled an interest in toxic leadership. Although scholars (e.g., Alvesson, 2020; Lemoine et al., 2019) have studied leadership, current social science has taken a one-sided perspective of the subject, emphasising its positive and constructive features with less focus on its cloudy side (Harris & Jones, 2018). Toxic leadership is, unfortunately, a familiar reality in many organisations, which several followers have incredibly experienced (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Tavanti, 2011), but are unwilling to file formal complaints due to associated risks (job insecurity and fear).

Notably, the tumour of toxic leadership in the workplace seems to be widening rapidly and appearing more noticeable when chaotic (Guo, et al., 2022; Williams, 2022). This is despite several organisations' estimated \$45.5 billion spent globally on education for leaders across all levels (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). Numerous statistics, however, demonstrate that these investments need to budge the needle in critical areas, such as follower engagement and public trust (Williams, 2022). Although, certain studies in leadership, management, psychology (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007), and organisational behaviour have focused on toxic leadership (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014;

Schmidt, 2014) and toxins in organisations (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Walton, 2007), yet, literature on toxic leadership still make up a remarkably trivial proportion of negative leadership research (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). A few studies on the corporate realm found that toxic leadership accounted for a 48% reduction in work effort and a 38% decline in output quality (Singh, et al., 2018). Notably, by disengaging followers who are more inclined to leave the workplace and increasing turnover (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020), toxic leadership can result in significant human and financial costs due to increased hiring, recruitment, and training expenses (Hlupic, 2020; Mitchell, et al., 2022; Williams, 2022).

The above-mentioned suggests that we may be better off viewing workplace dysfunction and toxicity as typical occurrences of contemporary organisational life rather than aberrant ones. If true, what can be done to foresee these harmful and “murky” aspects of leadership and organisational behaviour and perhaps even predict them, considering the exorbitant cost of replacing followers of toxic leaders? Indeed, toxic leaders are less concerned about their environment, unleashing poisonous attitudes and harming creativity, autonomy, and followers (Kilic & Günsel, 2019). To accentuate the emergence and semiotics of toxic leadership (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020), this paper examines the context of toxic leader behaviour with a rethink of three interconnected questions that form the basis of this paper. Are we conceptualising and measuring toxic leadership effectively? Are the various toxic leadership behaviours theoretically understood and well-studied? Are existing empirical studies well-researched to provide enough evidence to understand why toxic leaders fail to foster leadership in followers and the mechanisms they infect followers?

2. Understanding Toxic Leadership – Main Insights

Whicker (1996) argues that toxic leaders achieve success by destroying their followers. Reed (2004) referred to toxic leaders as abusive, petty, self-promotional and malicious individuals who seemingly disregard followers’ well-being and are ignorant of the team atmosphere. Green (2014) points out that a toxic leader is any person who impairs the effectiveness of the organisation over which they have direct/indirect responsibility. Watkins and Walker (2021) assert that toxic leaders are value-less leaders that emerge to authority due to certain accompanying leadership traits and narcissistic personalities. Across these various conceptualisations of toxic leadership, there is yet to be a comprehensive definition of toxic leadership, though the concepts share crucial harmful components (Klein, 2010). Undoubtedly, toxic leaders play a fundamental role in developing a toxic workplace, and their repertoires include a wide range of toxicity, from moderate, inadvertent toxicity to outright depravity. Specifically, toxic leaders have been linked by several scholars (e.g., Blatnik, 2021; Burns, 2017; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Watkins & Walker, 2021) to the consistent display of specific traits and behavioural patterns (such as abrasiveness, egotistical, unethical, hypocritical, intimidation, untrustworthy, neurotic impostor, vacillation).

The underlying principle of toxic leadership is that it weakens morale, commitment, motivation, effectiveness, and alignment with workplace goals, which is the hallmark of successful and sustainable leadership. Toxic leaders frequently apply intimidating strategies to convey to their followers that they are replaceable (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021). This is anticipated to drive followers to work harder to retain their jobs. However, previous research

indicates that while this technique may work at the outset, productivity will eventually fall due to its negative effect on followers' morale and well-being (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Research indicates that the consequences of toxic leadership can generate long-lasting stressors and just as incapacitating as the frequent workplace risks. For instance, extant literature (for review, see Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Rasool et al., 2021) has linked negative consequences (for example, depression, unsatisfaction, psychological trauma, distrust, reduced commitment, frustration, and stress) of toxic leadership to followers.

Building on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that a follower's actions towards a leader would be altered once there is an interaction, we argue that followers would equate the valence of their interactions with similar attitudes based on the reciprocity rules guiding social exchange (Cropanzano et al., 2017). For instance, Dobbs and Do's (2019) study examining the relationship between organisational cynicism and perceived toxic leadership found that followers who report having toxic leaders are likelier to exhibit negative attitudes towards the organisation. Undeniably, toxic leaders purposefully hurt followers, enrich themselves at the expense of others, and inadvertently cause substantial harm that weakens follower morale (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Low morale, however, has been linked to a mass exodus and significant follower turnover, adversely influencing workplace retention and raising the cost of recruiting (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020).

3. Operationalising Toxic Leadership

Undoubtedly, toxic leadership has been conceptualised in various forms, including abusive supervision (Reed, 2004; Schmidt, 2008), destructive leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020), maladjusted behaviours (Whicker, 1996), exploitive behaviours (Walton, 2007), unpredictable/vacillating leadership, self-promoting leadership, authoritarian leadership (Schmidt, 2008, 2014), egotism (Gerven, et al., 2022), dysfunctional leadership (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021) and self-serving behaviours (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Schmidt (2008, 2014) examined the proliferation of these diverse notions to construct a five-dimensional measurement of toxic leadership as individuals who are abusive, self-promoting, authoritarian, narcissistic, and unpredictable/vacillating. While Green (2014) agrees with Schmidt's dimension, he asserts that it lacks the unethical perspective of toxic leadership. As a result, he developed a four-dimensional measurement centred on egotism, ethical failure, leader incompetence and neuroticism. Celebi et al.'s (2015) follow-up works expanded on toxic leaders' psychological and emotional dysfunction, constructing toxic leadership measurement on a four-dimensional pattern of unappreciativeness, utilitarian, egoistic and psychological dysfunction (see Table 1).

Table 1: Dimensions of Toxic Leadership Behaviour

Toxic Leadership Dimension	Author	Country/sector
Unappreciativeness, Utilitarian,	Celebi et al. (2015)	Turkey

Egoistic, Psychological dysfunction		
Egotism (self-centred), Ethical failure, Incompetence, Neuroticism (wild mood changes)	Green (2014)	United States Education sector
Abusive, Narcissism, Self-promotion, Authoritarian, Unpredictable (vacillating)	Schmidt (2008)	United States Military & multi-sector (including education)

Table 1 illustrates the various dimensions of toxic leadership and the authors that derived the dimensions based on their studies. Schmidt (2008) classified toxic leadership into five different dimensions, while Green's (2014) and Celebi et al.'s (2015) classifications were based on four different dimensions.

In contrast to our limited understanding of toxic leadership, it is evident that toxic leaders exhibit a variety of negative behaviours, and toxic leadership is not a singular act of a few negative behaviours based on the dimensions mentioned above, as studies to date have relied heavily on these dimensional distinctions and scales. Instead, as previously established in the main insights, toxic leadership behaviours are a pattern of actions that repeatedly undermine an organisation's objectives and followers' overall well-being (Klein, 2010). The question is, are these dimensions an accurate representation of toxic leadership behaviours?

4. Antecedents of Toxic Leadership

In the past two decades, toxic leadership has been in the limelight of researchers because of the resultant destructive behaviours and the harmful effect it confers on followers and the workplace (Hogan, et al., 2021). Certain scholars (for example, Singh et al., 2018; Walton, 2007) argue that power, status, position, and influence are crucial antecedents of toxic leadership. Notably, trivial challenges to a toxic leader's freedom of action might be interpreted as a danger to their psychological survival and security, resulting in fierce defensive reactions. Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) posit that some leaders are deemed to become toxic to remain relevant because evolution is regarded as a competitive game, where the wins stem from outscoring the competitors and followers. Smith and Fredricks-Lowman (2020) linked leader incompetence to toxic leadership, arguing that followers perceived to be competent are viewed as threats and are quickly marginalised in the workplace. Contrarily, Hogan et al. (2021) linked absentee leaders to toxic leadership. Abdulai (2021) associated nepotism, inadequate leadership training and culture with toxic leadership from the African perspective. Lucas (2021) points out two main components that breed toxic leadership in organisations – vulnerable followers and a corporate culture that permits damaging behaviours to flourish and become pervasive. While some followers are incapable of confronting them (conformers/altruistic), others become eager enablers (colluders/egocentric). Drawing insights from social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), we argue that certain followers could take the toxic leader as their role model, emulating their attitudes/behaviours due to their power and status, resulting in trickle-down effects.

5. Consequences

In the Western context, research has shown an adverse organisational cost of \$450 billion to \$550 billion annually in the United States of America because of toxic leaders. However, the same organisations could save \$12,500 if they avoid recruiting a toxic leader (Bremer, 2020). This supports the previous works of Pfeffer (2018) that found that toxic leadership caused by poor management led to job stress costs of over \$300 billion yearly in the United States of America. The works of Urquhart (2022) revealed that two-fifths of employees leave their jobs; 43% have quit their jobs at some time, while 53% are considering leaving their jobs in the United Kingdom because of toxic leaders. Prior research (e.g., Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Rasool et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2016) has associated the detrimental effects of toxic leaders on subordinates, including stress, distrust, emotional contagion, and psychological trauma. A glimpse of the Eastern sphere found that work pressure was responsible for the deaths of at least one million employees in China each year (Hlupic, 2020).

6. Agenda for Future Research

This article provides recommendations to overcome significant debates, especially about a simplified and holistic definition, to synthesise the literature so that future studies can go beyond currently known findings. Our analysis reveals that while toxic leadership has gained a little attention, many uncharted frontiers still need to be examined and explored further. Given the numerous avenues for further investigation, we highlight four crucial areas that are critical to expanding the toxic leadership literature: (1) toxic leadership definition and measurement, (2) leader vacillation, a trait or behaviour of toxic leadership, (3) dynamic personality of toxic leadership-follower perspective, and (4) trickle-down effect theoretical framework for future agenda.

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