

From Great Resignation to Great Reflection: The New Era of Research and Realignment in Workplace Culture and Leadership

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The early 2020s will likely be remembered as the most significant inflection point for workplace research and reform since the industrial era. The convergence of a global pandemic, the Great Resignation, and an unprecedented expansion of academic inquiry into workplace culture has permanently altered how organizations view leadership, employee engagement, and retention.

Before 2020, the scholarly conversation around toxic leadership and workplace culture often hovered at the margins—recognized as important, yet seldom granted the theoretical integration or cross-disciplinary rigor it deserved. Much of the literature at the time, as I argued in my own 2022 article *Exploring Toxic Leadership: An Integrated Framework for Organizational Recovery and Associate Retention* (Hughes, 2022), focused primarily on identifying problems rather than proposing viable pathways to organizational recovery.

In the short years since, a remarkable shift has occurred. Studies exploring the mechanisms of toxicity, the relational dynamics of leadership, and the predictors of turnover and disengagement have multiplied. The once-niche topic of “toxic leadership” has become a defining feature of twenty-first-century management discourse. Even more encouragingly, scholars and practitioners are now blending insights from psychology, human capital theory, and business management to create a more holistic view of organizational health.

This shift is not only academic—it is cultural. As public discourse on leadership and workplace conditions migrates from the boardroom to the social media feed, the boundaries between scholarly research and popular influence are dissolving. The result is a new ecosystem of awareness—one with both tremendous promise and potential pitfalls.

The Great Resignation as a Catalyst for Inquiry

The Great Resignation of 2021–2022 represented more than a labor-market anomaly; it was a collective statement about workplace culture and the meaning of work itself. Over 47 million Americans voluntarily left their jobs in 2021 alone. Economists analyzed labor shortages, HR specialists discussed “employee experience,” and sociologists examined identity and meaning at work. Yet behind each dataset was a shared recognition: workers were no longer willing to tolerate toxic environments that prioritized production over people.

The post-pandemic workplace reset inspired a surge of scholarly attention. Searches in Google Scholar, Scopus,

and Web of Science show a dramatic rise in publications since 2020 featuring keywords such as *toxic leadership*, *organizational culture*, and *employee retention*. Research across business, education, and health sciences began to explore toxicity not merely as an interpersonal dysfunction but as a systemic, structural condition—amplified by poor communication, low psychological safety, and leadership deficits.

Importantly, the language of recovery entered the conversation. Scholars began to ask: How can organizations repair the damage of toxic leadership? What role do trust, accountability, and transparent communication play in rebuilding engagement? These are the same questions I sought to address in 2022 through an integrated framework linking toxic leadership to retention outcomes. The years since have shown that those questions were early indicators of a broader movement—a recognition that cultural repair must be deliberate, evidence-based, and leadership-driven.

The Rise of Interdisciplinary Inquiry

One of the most heartening developments since 2020 has been the rise of interdisciplinary research on workplace well-being. The walls separating organizational psychology, leadership studies, and business management are increasingly porous.

The intersectionality of human capital theory and behavioral science has proven especially fruitful. Where earlier studies might have focused narrowly on managerial behaviors or employee satisfaction, newer work examines the entire ecosystem of engagement—how psychological safety, equity, leadership style, and organizational structure interact. The field is beginning to adopt a systems view, acknowledging that leadership toxicity cannot be understood solely through individual personality traits; it is cultivated—or mitigated—by the surrounding environment.

My 2022 framework proposed that meaningful recovery requires alignment between human systems and operational systems—that retention and engagement emerge not from charismatic leadership alone, but from structural coherence and psychological safety. In the years since, multiple studies have extended this line of thinking, examining how high-trust, low-toxicity environments can co-exist with strong performance expectations. This evolution reflects an encouraging maturity in the field: researchers are no longer content merely to diagnose dysfunction; they seek to operationalize health.

From Academia to the Algorithm: The Mainstreaming of Leadership Discourse

Perhaps the most intriguing phenomenon of this era is the rapid mainstreaming of academic insights on leadership. Once confined to scholarly journals and management conferences, discussions of psychological safety, servant leadership, and emotional intelligence now trend across social media platforms.

A particularly visible example of this shift appeared in *Inc. Magazine's* (Haden, 2025) *Top 50 Leadership and Management Experts list*. Nearly one-third of those recognized are social influencers—individuals who combine personal branding with leadership commentary. Many of these influencers cite peer-reviewed research (their own or others') and translate it into accessible, motivational content. Through podcasts, short-form videos, and keynote speeches, they are doing what traditional academic publishing often struggles to do: bringing research-based insights into the everyday language of organizational life.

This democratization of leadership knowledge represents both opportunity and risk. On one hand, it signals a cultural embrace of topics long neglected by the corporate mainstream. Ideas that once circulated only within academic or HR circles—psychological safety, vulnerability, and empathy—are now shaping how the public conceptualizes leadership itself. On the other hand, the rise of “influencer expertise” creates a new interpretive layer between research and practice. The challenge is ensuring that nuance and accountability are not lost in translation.

The Promise—and Peril—of Influence

The growing presence of leadership influencers should be understood as a double-edged development. At their best, these voices serve as interpreters of complex ideas, helping operational leaders internalize concepts that might otherwise remain theoretical. Many cite academic sources directly, amplifying the reach of legitimate scholarship.

Yet, the danger lies in oversimplification. Algorithms reward engagement, not rigor, and “toxic leadership” can easily become a catch-all term for any form of discipline, accountability, or disagreement. As leadership principles enter the viral economy, the subtleties that differentiate healthy accountability from hostility risk being flattened.

The narrative emerging from some popular media suggests that the cure for toxicity is the complete elimination of pressure, performance metrics, or critical feedback. This is a misreading of the research. Accountability and meritocracy are not incompatible with psychological safety—they are its natural complement. In fact, evidence from organizational psychology suggests that employees experience greater trust when expectations are clear, feedback is consistent, and performance standards are applied equitably. The healthiest cultures are not those without pressure, but those where pressure is paired with purpose.

Organizations must resist the false binary between empathy and excellence. A high-trust culture does not require abandoning rigor; it requires embedding fairness

and humanity into systems of performance. The emerging literature since 2020 is increasingly united on this point: sustainable retention and engagement depend not on comfort, but on credibility.

A Shift Toward Solutions-Oriented Research

One of the most exciting academic trends since 2020 has been the growing number of solutions-oriented studies. Prior to 2020, much of the literature cataloged the symptoms of toxic culture without prescribing actionable interventions. As I observed in 2022, the field needed integration—linking psychological constructs with operational strategies.

Recent studies have answered that call. Researchers are now exploring interventions ranging from leadership coaching and emotional intelligence training to organizational redesign and culture audits. In the health sector, for example, scholars such as Labrague (2023) have examined toxic leadership's effects on nurse retention, offering evidence-based frameworks for healthier environments. In business and education, similar progress is visible, with hybrid models of coaching, peer feedback, and culture assessment gaining traction.

Even more promising is the increased collaboration between practitioners and scholars. Practitioners bring lived experience from within organizations, while academics contribute methodological discipline. Together, they are producing insights that are both credible and applicable—a hallmark of mature scholarship.

Cultural Momentum Beyond Academia

The post-2020 era has also seen a broad cultural momentum toward reexamining the nature of work. The pandemic normalized conversations about mental health, burnout, and boundaries. Movements such as “quiet quitting” and “conscious leadership” have, for better or worse, redefined what it means to engage authentically with work.

Corporate leaders now face a workforce more informed, vocal, and discerning than ever before. Employees expect not just fair pay and flexibility but psychological safety and meaningful development. These expectations are not simply generational; they are structural. The modern workforce is operating within a social climate that increasingly values transparency and humanity over hierarchy.

This cultural evolution has forced organizations to confront an uncomfortable truth: retention is not merely an HR metric—it is a reflection of leadership integrity. Turnover is the invoice that culture sends to management. The organizations thriving in this new landscape are those that have embraced this reality and invested in leadership capacity as a strategic imperative.

The Next Frontier: Integrating Research Across Disciplines

Despite progress, the need for deeper interdisciplinary integration remains pressing. As I argued in 2022, ad-

vancing our understanding of toxic leadership and organizational recovery requires the collaboration of multiple disciplines: business management, social sciences, psychology, and human capital theory. Psychology offers insight into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms of leadership behavior. Sociology contextualizes those behaviors within systems of power and culture. Business and management research provide frameworks for translating insight into practice. Human capital research adds the economic dimension—linking leadership behavior to measurable organizational outcomes.

The challenge—and opportunity—is to merge these streams into a coherent model of organizational health. Fragmented knowledge serves no one. The next generation of research must move beyond parallel exploration toward true integration. To achieve this, institutions must encourage cross-disciplinary publication and incentivize collaboration. Journals, conferences, and funding agencies should prioritize projects that unite behavioral science with strategic management. The payoff is not only academic advancement but practical solutions for organizations navigating post-pandemic realities.

Reclaiming the Purpose of Leadership

Leadership, at its core, is a moral act. The past several years have revealed what happens when that moral dimension is neglected. Toxic leadership erodes trust, silences innovation, and fractures teams. The remedy is not a new management fad or algorithmic performance system—it is a renewed commitment to integrity, empathy, and accountability.

The new discourse on leadership must reassert that accountability is not antithetical to compassion. Indeed, the most effective leaders are those who hold others—and themselves—to high standards while fostering psychological safety. These leaders model humility and consistency, creating cultures where people can thrive without fear. Public discourse has a crucial role to play here. Influencers and thought leaders can amplify this message if they choose depth over popularity. Academia, meanwhile, must continue to refine and validate the frameworks that undergird these principles. If both sides uphold their part, the boundary between research and practice can become a bridge rather than a barrier.

Toward a New Leadership Ethic

What, then, does the future of workplace leadership demand? It demands the courage to confront systemic toxicity not as an inevitable byproduct of ambition but as a preventable design flaw. It demands that organizations treat culture as infrastructure, not ornamentation. It demands that we redefine success to include consistency and sustainability of performance—not only of profits but of people.

Scholarly progress since 2020 has laid the groundwork for this transformation. Researchers have mapped the terrain of toxicity; now they must chart the path to recovery. Practitioners have begun implementing change; now

they must measure and share results. Public voices have awakened interest; now they must steward it responsibly.

If there is one lesson the Great Resignation taught us, it is that people no longer separate the moral and the professional. The same conscience that guides personal life now informs career decisions. Organizations that understand this will not merely retain talent—they will earn loyalty.

Conclusion: The Great Realignment

The years following 2020 have been more than a period of disruption; they have been a period of realignment. Scholarship, practice, and culture have converged around a shared recognition that workplace toxicity is neither inevitable nor benign. We have moved from resignation to reflection. From reflection to research. And now, from research to reform.

As scholars, practitioners, and public voices, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that this momentum continues with integrity. That means holding ourselves accountable—not just for the cultures we critique, but for the ideas we promote.

Leadership is not a static trait but a living system of behaviors, values, and relationships. If we are to build workplaces worthy of human potential, we must cultivate leaders who balance empathy with excellence, vision with humility, and authority with accountability. The past five years have taught us that the cost of toxic leadership is too high, and the benefits of healthy culture too profound, to ignore. The next five must be about integration—uniting disciplines, voices, and intentions toward a singular aim: transforming the workplace from a site of burnout and resignation into a community of purpose and belonging. That is the leadership revolution our era demands—and the one our scholarship must help deliver.

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