



**Examining Toxic Leadership:
An Integrated Framework for Organizational Recovery**

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Abstract

In the context of leadership evaluation and toxic personalities, much extant literature serves to review the characteristics and traits associated with toxic leadership. However, few studies explore the conducive conditions supporting these individuals; and still fewer studies provide insight in how leadership and others may be empowered to overcome and restore trust and organizational culture and to support employee retention. This qualitative phenomenological study considers the lived experiences of a varied cross-section of fourteen people-leaders who have worked for or alongside toxic leaders, and presents practices towards culture recovery and employee retention. Further presented is an integrative framework tool to assist in these culture recovery and associate retention efforts. This study reviews the toxic leadership actions and consequences, the follower observations and contributions, and the organizational factors found in these circumstances with the central question: What are the influencers that affect associate retention where a toxic leader has existed, and what steps can organizations proactively act upon to positively influence associate retention?

Keywords: toxic leadership, leadership typologies, human capital, company culture, organizational behaviors, organizational trust, associate retention, employee retention, culture recovery, organizational integrity, ethics, ethical leadership

Examining Toxic Leadership: An Integrated Framework for Organizational Recovery

In the context of leadership evaluation and toxic personalities, much of the existing literature serves to review the characteristics and traits associated with toxic leadership. In fact, Kaiser et al. (2008), found in a review of ten meta-analyses how only 18% of studies in the leadership literature utilized group or organizational outcomes as criteria. However, few studies explore the conducive conditions associated to support toxic leaders within organizations, and still fewer studies provide insight to how leaders and others may be empowered to overcome and restore trust and organizational culture.

The need for depth in this area of study extends across social sciences, human capital management, and business administration. The majority of all businesses, including product and tech-oriented industries, remain tethered to the people who lead and work in the organization. As demographic and cultural shifts require increasing levels of awareness in the workplace, it is incumbent upon organizational leaders to actively improve the working environment by recognizing, removing, and recovering from, toxic behaviors by those in leadership positions. Market shifts and fluctuations can at times create great competition for a skilled workforce, and external forces will increase retention risks if not proactively mitigated (Winn & Dykes, 2019). Moving beyond reasonableness and appropriateness in interpersonal workplace interactions, removing and recovery from toxicity should be sought after as an organizational competitive advantage.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to identify effective practices in culture recovery and associate retention when a toxic leader has existed in the organization, as well as methods to avoid the continued support of leaders who exhibit toxic or destructive behaviors, and recognize the followers who are susceptible to them. This study will be conducted under a transformative lens, and will undertake to explore the methods that organizations could use proactively to restore organizational culture and retention, and how

these are viewed and processed by the retained associate base. Additionally, this study will review the impacts of toxic leaders on an organization, what steps leadership can take to prevent, mitigate, and recover from, toxic leadership, and reviews recommendations to affect associate retention. In this research, the term “associate retention” is defined as the sum retention of employees, gig-workers, consultants, and other compensated workers. The sum of the findings will be aggregated into a Culture Recovery Framework by which the lived experiences of the participants can shape organizational practices in the future. A graphical tool will be presented to assist the reflection and decision-making processes by business and people-leaders.

Research Questions

To identify opportunities for adjustment and change, it is important to understand the lived-experiences of those who have worked for, or alongside, a toxic leader. Further, a wider review is needed to consider any of the contributing factors to the culture that allowed (or promoted) such behavior. Lastly, such a review can provide insight into the decision-making criteria for associates who choose to stay or leave the organization.

Central Research Question

What are the influencers affecting associate retention where a toxic leader has existed, and what steps can organizations proactively act upon to positively influence associate retention?

Sub-Questions

Theme: Shifts in Mindset

1. How did the toxic leader impact the organization?

Theme: Change Management

2. What steps has senior leadership taken to recover from a toxic leader?

Theme: Practice Development

3. Why did certain associates stay while others left?

4. What lasting effects of the toxic leader remain with the organization?

Literature Review

The study of toxic leadership is found across multiple scientific disciplines, from psychology to sociology, and aspects have been individually dissected from engagement to leader/follower traits (Purcell, 2015; Tate, 2009; Tepper, 2000; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). This literature review was undertaken to isolate and compile findings into an integrated set of practices, which organizational leaders can utilize to avoid toxic leadership behaviors, and to overcome the consequences should they at some point exist.

From the literature review, three primary themes associated with toxic leadership and associate retention were identified. The first observed theme were the shifts in organizational and academic mindset around toxic leader definitions, contributors, and mitigating factors. The second theme centered on organizational change management around the avoidance, mitigation, and removal of toxic leadership. The third theme shown was the development of practical applications of the research to avoid, mitigate, and recover from toxic leadership, and of maintaining associate retention. The research sub-questions were categorized within these themes.

Shifts in Mindset

Literature has shown shifts, or refinements, in how toxic leadership is studied and researched. As perspectives shift and focus changes, some research can appear disjointed and less applicable. Applying unclear or inconsistent definitions, or finding causal relationships without recognizing reverse causation or any number of other factors, may be ineffectual. An aspect of developing the toxic leadership construct includes reviewing the conducive conditions, which include organizational attributes as well as follower tendencies. Studies have shown how time, context, and poorly aligned organizational goals or reward systems can exacerbate weak or flawed leaders in the workplace (Purcell, 2014; Tate, 2009; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). The organizational climate, referring to the collective behaviors and feelings toward an organization,

can help us understand susceptibility to toxic leadership within said organization (Walker & Watkins, 2020).

There is agreement in the literature how toxic leadership can lead to significant challenges in the organization (Irshad & Afridi, 2011; Lee et al., 2018). This may include lost brand equity, high cost of associate turnover, and loss of institutional knowledge, poor productivity in associated departments and work groups, and risk of job behavior deviancy. Mackey et al. (2019) validated a negative relationship between toxic leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors, and how highly destructive leadership levels were correlated with overall workplace deviance by followers. Evidence suggests that when unethical leaders have high relationship connections with subordinates, there is a high correlation in increases of unethical behavior by those same subordinates (Vriend et al., 2020).

Research exploring the relationships between toxic leadership and associate retention shows how organizational culture (in this instance defined as effective culture, job satisfaction, observed integrity and trust, along with communication and recognition) and environment, may have a greater impact on retention when compared to compensation and other traditional factors. Associate retention, though, cannot serve as the sole indicator of toxic leadership. An individual working for a toxic leader is more likely to experience a sense of incongruence between their preferred work environment and the environment pronounced by the toxic leader. Even in the face of toxic leadership, retention may not be negatively affected with subordinates who have less job mobility, or in a suppressed job market (Mandhanya, 2015; Matos et al., 2018; Tepper, 2000). Research has presented evidence of the tangible effects of negative leadership on followers where results include both psychological and physical harm. Additional literature lists psychological consequences on the follower including: self-doubt, high stress, anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Webster et al., 2016).

Within the literature, associate or employee engagement is often reviewed. The term employee engagement refers to the level of associate interactions and efforts most affected by

the leaders' management practices, and like toxic leadership, engagement should be recognized in how it varies amongst individuals based upon their own life experiences and circumstances. The suggestions that leaders must be aggressive or caustic in their relationships with subordinates has been proven to be counter-productive to lasting engagement with the workforce (Purcell, 2014; Vreja et al., 2016). While toxic, a prestige-driven leader may achieve increased (although perhaps temporary) performance results in an organization, and this may manifest in associate surveys as follower engagement (Bell, 2020; Walker & Watkins, 2020). The narcissism level of the leader was shown to be negatively correlated to the active engagement of the follower over time. The affected associates have been shown to develop coping mechanisms to function or endure in a toxic environment (Bell, 2020; Walker & Watkins, 2020). It should be noted how newer studies are showing variations in associate consequences of toxic leadership in followers based on demographic differences in age, culture, and gender.

Change Management

As organizations seek to avoid, mitigate, or recover from, toxic leadership, change management considerations should be made to avoid trading one challenge for another. Risks may result in a number of consequences, so these should be considered and mitigated. Management should act proactively because when toxic leaders are present, executive-level decisions generate different reactions, which should be considered and mitigated (Schein, 1990; Spicer, 2020; Yaghi, 2019). For effective change, organizations should be able to communicate their past, present, and future plans to the organization to provide the needed sense of security and stability promoting retention, but also engagement and "buy-in" to the direction of change. Personal job security trumps organizational commitment (Mandhanya, 2015; Schien, 1990; Yaghi, 2019).

As Tepper (2000) described toxic or abusive supervision as to subordinates' perception of their supervisors acting in manners of sustained displays of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, Winn and Dykes (2019) suggested, "Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to

deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves, destroying initiative and morale” (p. 40). These toxic behaviors can be summarized as leading with fear, low concern for subordinates or peers, high self-interest and narcissism, and attributes which are contrary to follower well-being. In order to save face, toxic leaders may find followers to whom they can deflect blame from themselves, and to shield from view their own failures at the expense of others (Bell, 2017; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Organizations which do not obtain (and retain) the skills necessary to avoid, mitigate, or counteract this toxic leadership will be plagued with the taxes of hidden costs, brand value loss, and poorer performance (Vreka et al., 2016). These challenges impede change efforts in both macro and micro environments, and may reduce change management credibility in future change endeavors (Vreka et al., 2016).

Practice Development

A number of practices to avoid hiring, or later to remove, toxic leaders are suggested through the diverse literature ranging from engagement practices to screening for person-job fit. As toxic leaders operate in environments best fit for their own actions and activities, it is necessary to present an environment more conducive to positive outcomes. Organizational culture with emphasis in trust, wellness, leadership, and recognition positively correlates with employee longevity and retention (Purcell, 2014). Supporting the need for on-purpose efforts by engaging-through-activity is an organizational weakness, and merely “doing engagement” by conducting surveys and reporting back on findings will not lead to positive change (Winn & Dykes, 2019).

Presenting a model of positive leadership can be effective in developing higher leadership standards and expectations in the organization. Ethical leadership, more so than other leadership styles, has the statistically greatest significance in affecting millennial retention rates and overall job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2016). Developing leaders requires guided self-reflection, and building awareness; further, these ethical leaders are consistent, transparent, and are known and respected for their integrity (Landesz, 2018). Organizations can help

overcome toxic-leader modeling through requirements of increased amounts of experiential learning in order to model correct behavior (Landesz, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Winn & Dykes, 2019).

The perception of ethics can add value to the organization through increased retention and lower tolerance for toxic leadership. A positive statistical relationship exists between the perceived leadership morality and the fairness actions of the leader (Covella et al., 2017). Interestingly, the Covella et al. (2017) research also found how perceptions of ethical leadership in the organization were increased when the followers rated the existence of ethical leadership higher than the leader, but not vice versa. Positive leadership influence shows a positive relationship with employee retention. Organizational justice (distributive justice and procedural justice) also plays a pivotal role in employees' retention (Covella et al., 2017; Egorov, 2019; Irshad & Afridi, 2011).

Providing levels of individual autonomy, appropriate to their role, has shown to also increase retention. Mandhanya (2015) suggested that when employees feel they have some sense of control of outcomes of their job, stress is reduced and a sense of belonging and willingness to stay increases. A study by Yaghi (2019) showed that executives have a need for personal security and organizational transparency in order to be effective in their strategic roles. As a further tool of engagement to counter-act negative influences, organizations should continually seek out and review new innovations supporting associate retention and toxic leader avoidance. Speaking of the millennial generation, Landez (2018) said this group is playing the role of pioneer in how they approach solutions across demographic, geographic, and business segments.

Methods

The following section indicates the participants, materials, and procedure, for the collection of data for this research. The interview questions are shown as the central question, and associated sub questions. No follow-up questions were asked to ensure consistency.

Participants

Fourteen managers provided a purposeful sample from the volunteer candidates for this study. Each manager had personally experienced working for, or alongside, a described toxic leader within the last five years. Volunteers were gathered via outreach through business networks and social media, and as such represented geography from across the United States. All were managers with at least ten years of managerial tenure, and were not working in an executive capacity at the time of their experience. From the volunteer pool, 71% of those interviewed were women, and the remaining 29% were men. Ages varied, with 21% between the ages of 21-30, 29% between 31-45, and 50% between 46-55. Demographically through self-identification, 64% were Caucasian, and 21% indicated Hispanic/Latin-X. 14% indicated “other,” with none indicating African-American or Asian ethnicity. All participants were college-educated. 50% indicated they held an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, 36% held a master’s degree, and 14% held a doctoral degree. Participant industries included information technology, professional services, retail, education (primary and higher education), and more blue-collar business- to-consumer fields. Also included were office-based as well as distributed work force experiences.

Materials

Prior to the interview, each participant was provided with the interview outline. Further, they were supplied with the statement on informed consent as approved by the IRB, as well as a form confirming their consent to be recorded. The interview utilized Zoom for remote, face-to-face, video communication.

Procedure

A qualitative phenomenological study can be identified by certain characteristics. Per Creswell and Poth (2018), this type of study centers on a shared experience by a group of individuals, and includes an “exploration of this phenomenon with a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (p. 77). The research data collection typically involves interviews, with analysis centering on what the participants experienced and how these were

experienced. These experiences are incorporated into descriptive passages as the “culminating aspect of a phenomenological study” (p. 77).

Each interview was scheduled at least ten days in advance, and were conducted at times convenient to the participants with a goal of approximately 30 minutes spent per interview. With consent given, each interview was recorded using the internal recording options found with the video software. After a brief review of the purpose and aims of the study, and reconfirmation of the confidentiality of their answers, the central question was shared. Notes were taken sparsely as a result of the recording so the focus could remain on the participant’s answers. At the conclusion of the interview, a debriefing statement was provided orally and then sent via email to each participant as a follow-up. Upon completion of all interviews, the recordings were electronically transcribed and entered into MAXQDA qualitative analysis software for coding and analysis.

Analysis

Methodological rigor was attained through the utilization and application of multiple procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These include the application of triangulation, member checking, bias clarification, prolonged time in the field, and peer debriefing. Following the qualitative phenomenological process described by Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 81), study participants and responses were: **1.)** Interviewed individuals who have each experienced the phenomenon of toxic leadership, and interviews were transcribed and manually coded; **2.)** Generated categories and themes from the analysis of significant statements; **3.)** Developed textural and structural descriptions; **4.)** Reported the essence of the phenomenon by using a composite description; **5.)** Present the understanding of the essence of the experience in written form.

Findings

From fourteen verbatim transcripts, 412 significant statements were extracted through manual coding. Within these statements, seven themes emerged. The Appendix lists these

themes as codes, and provides examples from the transcripts for each. This phenomenological study was conducted under a transformative lens. For citation purposes within the findings, each participant will be identified by a reference identifier of Px (e.g. P1, P2, etc.). These citations each refer to transcripts of personal and confidential communications that were completed between June 5th and July 7th of 2021.

Theme 1: Toxic Cultures are not Congruent

Organizations most typically have mission or value statements painstakingly developed by executives and consultants to provide a framework, or direction, by which the organizational behaviors should travel. However, the experiences of those living and working inside of toxic cultures are not congruent with these stated organizational goals.

Multiple and varied attributes of toxic leadership are well documented in the literature, and further evidence of this was found in the stories shared by the participant group. Consistency between the existing literature and the findings from this study add validity. When asked to describe the social and working conditions when working for or with a toxic leader, responses included descriptors such as stressful, bullying, and trapped. This edified the research from Landes (2018) and Vreja et al. (2016), which described the varying degrees of anxiety when working for or with a toxic leader. Power or control-based toxic leadership behaviors from the literature of Lee et al. (2016) and Tate (2009) were described by the participants as, “you felt suppressed and very much afraid” (P1); and “the (toxic leader) basically set us in competition with each other” (P7). In the participant interviews, stated organizational goals such as to belong, value associates, and respect, were not represented by the behaviors modeled by organizational leadership.

Organizational Hypocrisy

Each of the fourteen participants shared their belief how the organization knew of the toxic leadership occurring in the workplace; however, the organization made little or no acknowledgement of its existence even when it acted directly contrary to the organizational

values or goals. Participant 2 said, “I see the toxic leader routinely going against what [the organization] says are its priorities”. Participants spoke often of organizational hypocrisy, which appeared to them to be an allowance, or at least an organizational acceptance of the toxic leader’s actions. Another participant spoke about how their organization publicly presented as a positive environment, where they were promoted as a resource or solution to all [customers], however senior leadership ignored the reality. Hypocrisy further extended to diversity efforts. Stories were shared, including one female participant who indicated their organization’s diversity efforts were for show only (P1).

Perhaps unique to this study were the near-unanimous comments regarding favoritism from the participants; and further, this behavior was accepted by the organization, even when it was known to exacerbate the toxic leader’s behaviors. Participants shared how this favoritism affected their own emotional and mental state, and how it tied into power and control among other toxic traits exhibited by the toxic leader(s).

Theme 2: Consequences of Toxic Cultures

There are tangible and quantifiable consequences from toxic leadership within an organization. These can include increased costs of associate turnover, administrative costs, and legal fees to settle complaints. Less-quantifiable consequences can appear in the form of loss of brand equity, greater difficulty in recruiting, or challenges associated with an internal or inter-department lack of trust. Participants from this study cited time and resources wasted as blame was shifted from leader to leader or department to department. Participant 1 shared, “...deflecting that responsibility on other people as if they were constantly saying that it was ‘not my fault; it’s their fault’”. Other participants described regular occurrences where information would be withheld from other departments, either as a power-control effort, or due to past abuse from a toxic leader. This lack of trust and organizational in-fighting was described by participants as losing or breach of trust, bitterness, and divisive. The organizational consequences served to break down the operational effectiveness of the organization. One participant shared how the

breakdown of trust affected each department and resulted in mixed messages and dysfunctional departmental relationships.

Additional Steps Required

A frequent position shared by the participants, and one highlighted in the literature of Vriend (2020) and Walker (2020), is that, as a key organizational consequence of toxic leadership, future work products will require additional steps to accomplish previously less-complicated outcomes. These extra steps may take time or tangible resources, yet they reduce the effectiveness of activities within the organization. One participant shared their experiences as, “you could not get anything done. Now [the toxic leader] is insecure; now she knows people don’t want to work with her” (P11). As organizations adopt systems and processes designed to increase efficiency and productivity, at some level these efforts may become negated through systemic challenges associated with toxicity and trust.

Diversity

There was a surprising finding through the participants’ commentary, highlighting the risks associated with homogeneity. When individuals think and act alike, this will perpetuate toxic tendencies from the leader, throughout the organization. This may also serve to nullify the mitigation efforts made by the organization or senior leadership. As a result, this homogeneity can serve to support the toxic leader’s behavior through the elimination or dilution of any oppositional voices. Further, it creates an environment where if the toxic leader is removed, a very similarly toxic leader will often take their place. A participant account suggested how this lack of diversity promulgates additional homogeneity, through specific efforts by the toxic leader to hire and retain allies and even friends and families to extend the scope of their influence or to dilute opposition.

Theme 3: No Recovery Efforts

When organizations identify toxic leadership, they may remove the toxic leader; however, they do not consistently make any substantial efforts to assist the organizational recovery from the toxic leadership and its resulting consequences.

Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) and Ou et al. (2017) suggested that organizations do not often take action to remove the toxic leader(s) from the organization. As a result, the organization is choosing to accept the associated consequences previously mentioned. This behavior of inaction can be attributed to a lack of a suitable replacement, a need to retain certain customers, a perceived financial risk (legal or otherwise) with the ousting of the leader, or some other consequence of removal.

Culture Focus

When the participants were asked to share any experiences with their organization's efforts to help the culture recover from the toxic leadership, each of the fourteen participants shared that they had not witnessed any meaningful efforts made to help the organization recover individually or collectively. Participants also shared little or no efforts associated with avoiding or mitigating the risk of toxic leadership, proactively, through training. The lack of congruity between the organizational values and what efforts the organization makes to achieve those values, causes challenges with people-leaders who feel they are lying to prospective associates.

Each participant shared their individual frustration collectively regarding their organizations, where the active mitigation or after-the-fact recovery of toxic leadership was such a low priority. Even in those organizations that made some recovery efforts known, participants shared that there was little follow-through with action.

Associate Support

Organizationally, the participants shared how they did not witness significant action to mitigate or recover from the toxic leader. Most also shared where little support was provided to

the individuals most affected by the toxic leader. This response coincides with findings from Lee et al. (2018) and Neves and Schyns (2018), which suggested that, while organizations may recognize, and even remove, toxic leadership from the ranks, they do not always act in ways to directly support the associate population individually or collectively. Efforts made by the organization were received by the participants as more about appearing to show care and consideration, than substance or results.

Other comments were shared by participants including, “we had an HR department, but I don’t recall any specific support coming from there” (P6); and “it was more hands off” (P4). In the absence of any perceived effort by the organization to recover from the toxic leader’s consequences, those affected are left to their own determination as to why the organization is not acting. One participant speculated, “all they thought about was how we can protect our liability and along that, of course, preventing having to pay any compensation should the person complain” (P11).

Associate Retention

Frequent consequences of the toxic leadership and environment shared by the participants were challenges with associate retention. This might include individuals who were new and struggling, who lacked faith they would receive necessary support, or those who were more seasoned, who chose to seek alternatives providing a less hostile environment. Organizations would track and perhaps even internally publish retention scores and categorize voluntary and involuntary associate losses, but participants shared the felt disconnect between reporting the numbers and the organization making any real efforts to identify causation and mitigate the resulting attrition. Rather, leadership would suggest the hiring manager had made “bad hires” (P12), or that they “would have left anyway, and change the conversation” (P7).

Theme 4: Organizations Do Not Take Ownership

For an organization to recover from toxic leadership and to mitigate the consequences associated with associate retention, the organization must take ownership and responsibility for the existence of, and the consequences of, this toxic leadership.

Unique to this study, and a construct based upon the participants' lived experiences, is the idea of organizational integrity. This is a combination of an organizational-level of self-awareness, leadership humility, and exhibited emotional intelligence to act in such a way as to make amends for past actions, inactions, or the consequences of organizational decisions. While described in different contexts, there is literature support for this concept from Irshad and Afridi (2011), Nowak and Zak (2020), and Walker (2020). A key attribute of organizational integrity is an ownership, or public acknowledgement, where the toxic leadership existed (or exists), and any lingering consequences or influences.

Behavior Framing

The perceived ownership of the consequences of toxic leadership begins with how the organization speaks about, or frames, the behaviors to the remaining associate population, and possibly other stakeholders. None of the participants shared an experience suggesting any definitive ownership. Responses included, "sweeping it under the rug again" (P1); and "they never talked about it" (P11). Those participants who indicated their organization did speak initially in terms representing ownership also shared how there was little or no follow-through. However, the most frequent perception was where the organization did not want to take responsibility, and where they would choose their own actions, which would simply distance themselves from the toxic leader's actions and the associated consequences. As shared by one participant speaking of the consequence of associate retention risk, "it was never looked at from that lens (ownership); it was always looked at from the lens that the associates would have left anyway" (P9).

Staying Power

In order to best understand the effects of the lack of organizational ownership, it is necessary to recognize the dissonance between the organization's perceived belief that all consequences and concerns will simply go away, and the reality in the staying power of the toxic leader's influence. Participants shared their belief in how the toxic influences would not leave the organization quickly. Example commentary includes, "I honestly don't see his influence leaving anytime soon" (P1); and "I feel like his influence is pretty robust at this point in time, and it would take a lot to remove this and to remedy that" (P3).

Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms

For organizations to truly recover from the effects of toxic leadership and to improve associate retention, associate coping mechanisms should both be acknowledged and supported. While no organization can fully prevent toxic leadership, the toxic behaviors may not always be evident to senior leadership. Observation of behaviors constituting coping mechanisms may be indicators for senior leadership to investigate. Further, additional coping measures could be encouraged and supported for those affected associates as they navigate their emotional response to the toxic behaviors. These findings are supported in the literature by Tepper (2000), Saqib and Arif (2017), and Scott (2018). Organizations may observe, for example, an increasing number of associates who are leaving the office for mid-day walks and view this as a potential coping mechanism for an increase in stress and fatigue in the workplace. The organization can appropriately encourage this coping effort through allocating specific time for the activity, ensuring that meetings are not scheduled to disallow such, and publicly acknowledging the value of the time spent. Retention consequences also represent a coping mechanism. For those associates who can, many will consider leaving the organization in hopes of finding a less toxic or hostile working environment.

Against the Grain

Several of the participants shared their individual struggles with the existence of toxic leadership, or the lack of action by the organization after the fact. Some of these comments were, “I created a support group; it was like, no, this is what’s going on, and there is a name for it; it’s called gas lighting” (P7); “somehow they have the grit to survive and fight through it” (P8); and “you would stay, and you would deal with the toxic leader if you wanted the future, if you wanted a career progression in this organization”. These comments were consistent across the participant group. As the participants shared their specific activities to help cope, they shared everything from exercise and meditation to retaliation. These common coping mechanisms are well documented in the literature by Tepper (2000), Saqib and Arif (2017), and Scott (2018), and there is consistency found in this study.

Silence and self-exclusion also presented as a frequent coping mechanism. In some cases, this was simply an associate keeping their head down in hopes they would not become a target; in other cases it was very willful. Participant 2 shared how “the organization did not recognize that silence is dissent”. They went on further to compare this silence to the company efforts at engagement or collaboration, and how the company failed to recognize how organizational shortfalls in these efforts were as a consequence of the response taken by associates who had previously felt unheard, or discounted, when they expressed concern of the toxic leader’s behaviors, or the organization’s recover efforts (or lack of).

Theme 6: Associate Retention Efforts

Participants were asked to share their understanding as to why some associates left, and others stayed with the organization. In aggregate, the answers mirrored those found in the previous literature and studies on associate retention from Mandhanya (2015), Matos et al. (2018), and Tepper (2000). These include realities of financial need, lack of alternatives, a need for stability, or some measure of loss of value occurring with their departure. This is consistent with the findings of Covella et al. (2017), Bindu (2017), and Lee et al. (2016). Examples from

participants include, “it provides work-life stability and unfortunately, that’s probably the only thing that’s keeping them there” (P6); and “I needed to stay there because at the time, I had no other [source of] income” (P13).

Lack of Organizational Efforts to Retain Globally

Some of the participants did share observed efforts by the organization to retain specific associates. Apart from any mitigation of the consequences of the toxic leader for the organization, these efforts were in circumstances to retain specific associates. Shared experiences included, “they had a budgeted line item to pay associates to stay” (P7); “her manager abused her in public, and she went to human resources, and she was able to negotiate a deal where she will work on flexible hours because if it comes out in public, it can be a lawsuit or whatever” (P11).

While there is evidence of specific-person retention efforts, there are examples of the organization’s actions suggesting they are not active in retaining the affected associate(s). This is evidenced by the participant responses such of, “when I shared my concerns about [the toxic leader] with HR, they responded by asking me if I had considered looking for a different job” (P14). Seven of the fourteen participants shared that there was a perceived lack of empathy, or an honest understanding of the unique perspective of the associate. This lack of empathy is perceived not only in a disconnect between leadership and non-leadership in ongoing work and experiences, but also in a lack of care or willingness to better understand the perspectives of any concerned individuals.

Theme 7: Training and Engagement Recommendations

Unique to this study, a number of recommendations have been provided by the participants ranging from additional training for lower-level leaders to engagement activities. Context and application may vary; however, the participants universally did not blame the organization(s) for the existence of toxic leadership, but rather believed the organization was to

blame for not addressing it publicly, owning their part in the concern, and making efforts to recover from the consequences of the toxic leader.

Acknowledgement

Universally, each participant said organizations could mitigate the consequences of toxic leadership and improve associate retention through public acknowledgement, followed by a visible and felt set of actions to recover. This was shared as, “at the first instance of toxic behavior, address it” (P1); “there needs to be transparency, and it must be at all levels of the organization” (P8); and “just listen [to the concerns]; don’t sweep it under the rug” (P13). The participant consensus was associates will have grace with the organizational leadership if they are open and honest about what has happened, and they recognize how there may be lingering effects.

Training

Also universally, each participant believes most of the challenges they had faced could have been minimized or even eliminated if there had been some level of training at a previous time. Participants shared how when training does occur, it is too often relegated to online classes and mandatory workshops, and how this training lacks the application and relevancy, which comes from open and honest dialogue amongst associates and leadership. Beyond training on leadership principals, participants shared a desire for training on collaboration and teamwork, associated with ongoing support within groups, teams, and departments, necessary to breakdown silo-thinking and other cultural boundaries.

Accountability & Action

A final aspect of recommendations shared by all participants was the need for some level of action and accountability, including accountability from the toxic leaders, as well as the organization as a whole. Accountability commentary included suggestions to act on reports and information coming from other associates, or making the effort to proactively assess and measure the leadership effective impact within the organization. Comments from participants

included, “you also have to show that you’re willing to take actions against it (toxic leadership), even if it’s not punitive” (P5); “look for a series of low-level complaints” (P5); and “back-up your team, no matter what” (P6).

This level of accountability, which can include either positive or punitive feedback mechanisms, extends beyond structural or process components. Having the structure is appropriate, but there may need to be an additional cultural shift to ensure there is mutual trust in the feedback mechanism. Some of the participants shared, “I think that organizations really need to find a way to create a safe space for people to talk...a real open door policy” (P3); “having a truly operationally neutral HR department is probably going to be your best way to overcome these leadership issues” (P12); and “leaders in my current company have some of their performance assessment tied to feedback from their teams” (P6). In each of these comments, the participants shared their individual desire to see corporate culture elevate to one which is counter-productive to toxic leadership behaviors. This extends to executive and non-executive compensation, developed with appropriate measurements and thresholds, and can be reflective of incentivization towards positive associate relations. The assertion is that if all parties are accountable to each other, and to the mission and values of the organization, then fewer issues will arise.

Discussion

The central research question for this work was to identify what are the influencers affecting associate retention where a toxic leader has existed, and what steps can organizations proactively act upon to positively influence associate retention? In this study, the participants shared their lived experiences through circumstances viewed as common in the workplace, including the lack of organizational efforts to remediate the challenges and consequences associated with these lived experiences. This includes the ultimate loss of human capital through various degrees of attrition. The findings can be summarized into two categories: trust

and accountability. Each of these can be further refined at the organizational level in how they interact with the firm as a whole, or how the organization interacts with the individual.

Trust

Toxic leadership can be viewed as the pro-self leader (Kaiser et al., 2008; Vreja et al., 2015; Winn & Dykes, 2020; Yaghi, 2019). This runs in direct opposition to the expectations of the associates who believe that in exchange for their individual efforts, the leader as an extension of the organization should provide productive feedback, guidance for improvement, and opportunities to grow. In the absence of trust, job performance deviance or other negative behavior exhibitions stemming from a lack of loyalty may exist and should be viewed as a direct consequence to the presence of toxic leadership. Organizations that do not actively remove or mitigate toxic leadership (individuals or traits) should not expect sustained performance or pro-organization behaviors and efforts from the associates.

Findings in this study suggest a validation of previous research by Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) and Webster et al. (2016), who found a significance in the severity of the emotional toll on workers in toxic leadership environments. The participants in this study shared personal identification with self-doubt, high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and even physical symptoms, as a direct result of toxic leadership and the breaking of the anticipated mutual trust. The psychological toll due to the breach of trust in the presence of toxic leadership was equally distributed across all age groups represented in this study. This challenges the recent findings by Winn and Dykes (2019) who proposed that millennials may be more susceptible to the effects of toxic leadership due to a greater level of compliance behavior, and less assertion to challenge poor behaviors. Organizations with low trust from associates will find poorer performance as mental energy is spent by the individual as a consequence of the existence of toxic leadership, rather than the focus on additive efforts for the firm.

This study found that in the absence of trust, associates were more likely to seek different employment opportunities. This supports the findings of Irshad and Afridi (2011) and

Lee et al. (2018), whose studies indicated the poorer rates of associate retention when toxic leadership was allowed to proliferate in the organization. Findings from this study add clarity to those retention studies, in that this breakdown of trust can happen either at the leader-follower relationship or at the organizational level. Organizations should expect poor associate retention rates in the absence of the trust coming from organizational integrity including the absence of toxic, abusive, or destructive leadership traits and typologies.

Accountability

Where trust is interpreted as the relationship between the firm and the individual, accountability is reference to the relationship between leadership and the organization. This study finds that the associate population will forgive leadership when toxic leadership has existed, providing that the organization is forthcoming and acknowledges the existence of the deviance between the toxic leaders' actions and the firm's stated vision and mission. This organizational integrity (Irshad & Afridi, 2011; Nowak & Zak, 2020; Walker, 2020), is the level at which the firm exhibits the composite leadership humility, ownership, and self-awareness to acknowledge the breach. The present study's findings support the willingness by the associate to look past organizational failings, providing the organization's open admission of the conditions to the worker population have been exhibited, and this aligns with findings in the research of Irshad and Afridi (2011), Nowak and Zak (2020), and Walker (2020). Participants shared that their organizations would not consistently acknowledge the challenges, either from a single leader or a group of leaders. This failure of accountability could be attributed to a leadership belief that the challenges to the associates were not substantial, or they were only such due to extenuating circumstances ranging from organizational change efforts, external forces, or general sensitivity of the affected associate. This mirrors the findings of Schein (1990), and Winn and Dykes (2019). Firms that do not consistently exhibit organizational integrity should not expect to be viewed by associates as accountable leaders.

Participants in this study consistently noted the absence of a willingness to engage in dialogue, listen and understand concerns or dissent, or to listen to associate feedback beyond superficial commentary including those coming from associate engagement efforts. While organizations may make efforts to solicit associate feedback, the same associate populations do not expect the firm will do anything with the findings. This is additive to the findings from Lee et al. (2018) and Ou et al. (2017) that indicated that engagement survey processes may not yield actionable insights towards change management or to support mitigation of toxic leaders. The present study adds to this research with the supposition that senior leadership may not actively be interested in, or willing to act on, findings that come from the efforts of associate engagement. Firms that do not seek deeper levels of engagement, in both global and individual communication, and follow-through with appropriate investigation, action, and reporting (as appropriate), will not be considered as accountable to the worker population and could fail in efforts to build trust and associate retention.

A significant sign of organizational accountability is in actions towards prevention of, or recovery from, toxic leadership and the associated consequences of such. This present study suggests that while these efforts are undertaken at the organizational level, they are not frequently modeled, nor are those who act contrary to these expectations disciplined in a constructive manner to change behavior more conducive to the desired culture. This results in an appearance of low-accountability and facilitates a breach of trust. Study participants indicated that the appropriate training to demonstrate, model, and apply experiential learning would increase effectiveness if adopted and reinforced at all levels of the organization. However, additive to this work, conducting these trainings yet not following through, and not holding leaders accountable to the presented standards, would be more detrimental than not having provided the training at all.

Implications

As found with this study, many who are affected by toxic leadership or the associated consequences would have grace with the organization visibly making an effort to take ownership of the circumstances, and to make necessary adjustments in the operating culture to mitigate future occurrences of the toxic behaviors. The present study results have led to the development of a framework titled the Culture Recovery Framework, which will be reviewed in greater detail. An application of the Culture Recovery Framework can provide a reasonable expectation in that the improved communication and transparency will assist in culture recovery and improve associate retention. Workers will first experience the improved working environment as their individual emotional needs are met alongside the increased productivity found in greater team work, new opportunities to strive for, and less time wasted on workplace conflict. With the increased stability and safety in the organization, innovation can flourish, and leadership should see greater buy-in and execution of strategy. Ultimately this leads to a positive effect on the organization's profit line with the combination of reduction of costs attributed to toxic leadership and cultures (turnover, legal, risk), and increased productivity per associate. In this improved organization, all stakeholders stand to gain from the effort.

Validity

To support validity in this work, safeguards were enacted to provide additional confidence in this qualitative work. Primarily, these included the adoption of rich text in conveying participant experiences, member checks and participant review, and consideration of disconfirming evidence and contradictory interpretations (Daytner, 2006). All attempts to remove researcher subjectivity were made to assist in the contribution to the greater body of work on this topic.

Limitations

This research was conducted during the summer of 2021, while still in the recovery stages following the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. With this, some situational experiences

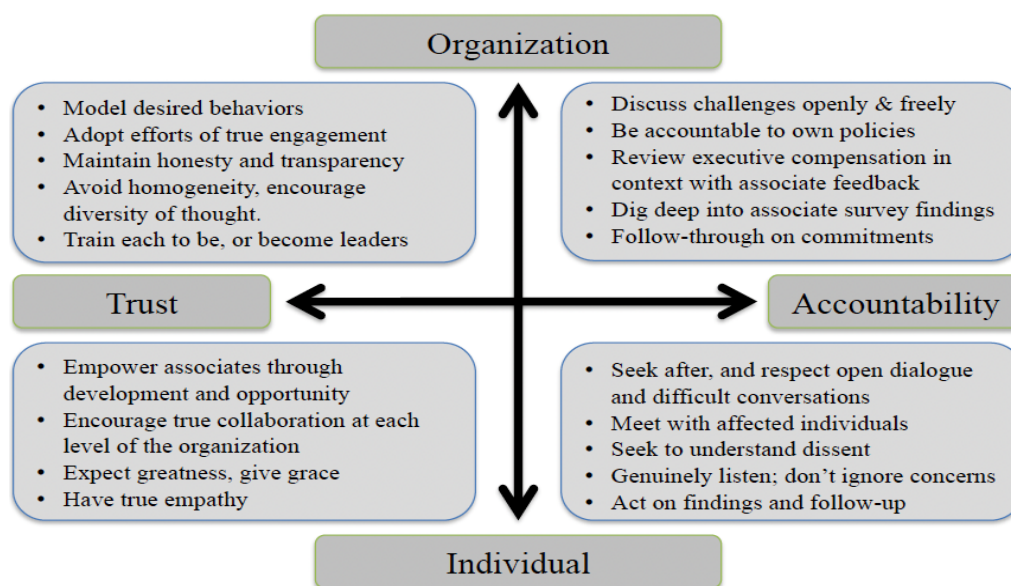
shared by the participants may have been exaggerated or mitigated circumstances through non-typical organizational efforts during this time. These risks may be exacerbated through the relatively small sample size of fourteen participants. The sample size could also disproportionately speak from their respective industries or fields (e.g., technology, finance, business services, higher education). Within this study, the subjects were predominantly Caucasian and missing the experiences of those in the Asian or African-American community. Further, this participant group included managers who were not executives. Additional perspectives may be gained from those at an executive level, or those who were not managers at all.

Recommendations

This qualitative study has produced a framework to guide organizational reflection and decision-making processes. Future research could be undertaken to validate through quantitative or qualitative means the effect of short and long-term application of the recommended framework.

The Culture Recovery Framework

Presented for this work, and developed from this study's findings, is an integrated asset for organizational recovery and associate retention (Figure), called the Culture Recovery Framework. This tool can be utilized by organizations which are actively seeking to recover from toxic leadership, or those in attempts to improve associate retention. Each quadrant represents reflection points for organizational decision-making. The Culture Recovery Framework application to associates could be considered individually or collectively, and represents the intersections of the individual and the organization through the intangible impressions of trust and accountability. To help increase or repair organizational trust concerns, the organization may consider encouraging diversity of thought, and for all levels of leadership, to consistently model behavior aligned with the vision and mission of the firm. When seeking to increase trustworthiness from the individual, the organization can affect this through

Figure*The Culture Recovery Framework*

empowerment and development, and the encouragement of collaboration. If accountability is deemed weak at the organizational level, the organization can consider speaking freely to their associates regarding the company shortcomings, and internally improve how consistently they are applying the desired practices. If the accountability-concern is between the organization and an individual, genuine listening with action and follow-up based on findings will improve the associate experience and deepen the trust and effort that is extended to the firm. Based on the research findings, the majority of concerns stemming from toxic leadership can be addressed through honest actions in one or more of these quadrants. Recommended actions to accomplish the goals of each quadrant are included in the model.

Organizational Accountability

In efforts to begin or reinforce culture recovery, the organizational leadership must take the initiative. Prior to building trust, the cultural shift must include steps to ensure all associates are part of an accountable organization that is not only transparent, but holds itself accountable to its own organizational standards.

Organizational Trust

As the organization strives to exhibit accountability, this will mature into a level of trust in the organization from the associate. At this level in the Culture Recovery Framework, associates at all levels can witness the commitment of the organization, through their direct reporting relationships. It is incumbent on the organizational leadership to ensure that these steps are consistent throughout the organization.

Individual Trust

As trust matures in the organization, this must be transferred to the individual. This is accomplished through empowerment and opportunity, and ensuring a working environment free of political hazards.

Individual Accountability

From a foundation of organizational and individual trust, the framework circle can be complete with individual accountability. This step is the congruency of application of trust towards, and from the organization, most especially in those times where there is misalignment between the desired culture and the realities of the current state.

Additional Considerations

As indicated in the recognized limitations, there are additional opportunities to expand and refine this research to include additional circumstances and scenarios for review. Each scholarly effort to test or increase the collective findings will ensure that the application of the recommendations can be adjusted for new and evolving leadership scenarios.

Demographics

Some ethnicities were under-represented in this study. Later work could purposely extend the review to the lived experiences of these groups to add validity, or a differing perspective, to the overall work and to refine the model as appropriate. While recognizing that anyone can find themselves in a circumstance enveloped in toxic leadership, marginalized

peoples, or others, may have fewer options for recourse, differing limitations on choices, or varied consequences from their actions or inactions.

Organizational Functions

Additional research could be undertaken to identify similar or differing findings from executive-level managers, or non-managers. This research was specific to non-executive managers, but the expansion to additional groups could add further insight into the leader-follower interactions, and the dynamic between these two parties. This research could look at direct reporting relationships, and 2nd level or skip-level dynamics. Team leads (non-manager), project managers, and similar could be reviewed for consistency in the study results.

Culture Recovery Framework Testing

As this work presents the Culture Recovery Framework, academic research should be considered to review case studies of organizations that apply said framework. This mode of validity can serve to support additional refinement of the model, and to also provide examples of the application that can serve organizations who seek to proactively, or reactively, apply the methods and techniques suggested in the framework. Case studies could focus on increases in associate retention and associate survey scores, and review them against metrics such as increases or decreases associated with productivity; or this could be expanded to compare directly against a triple bottom line.

Conclusion

Previous work on the topic of toxic leadership has been considerable, but has omitted the conducive conditions that allow for, and sustain, the organizational culture that supports the existence of toxic leadership (Kaiser et al., 2008). Further, toxic leadership and various typologies and traits have not carried consistent definitions throughout the existing literature; this can be especially evident when differing social science fields conduct research. The collective findings of this study can serve to further explore the central research question considering what are the influencers that affect associate retention where toxic leaders exist, or

have existed, and what steps that organizations can proactively take to positively influence associate retention. Findings suggest organizational cultures that lack personal and professional development, transparency, and accountability, can become fertile ground for toxic leaders. Further, the absence of proactive measures to reinforce organizational policies and boundaries may exacerbate not only the toxic cultures, but can also hinder recovery efforts. As the findings have further suggested, cultures of low-organizational trust not only create the environments where toxic leaders can thrive, but when added to low engagement and accountability actions by leadership, they contribute to associate attrition.

This study has utilized the lived experiences of those who have worked for, or alongside, toxic leaders, and sought to a) create clear definitions of toxic leadership and near-associated typologies and traits to support ongoing research on this topic, and b) create the Culture Recovery Framework by which people-leaders can review their organizational culture and support strategies to make environments less hostile and to support associate retention.

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Appendix: Codes

Topic	Themes w/Code Name (shortened name)	Definition	When to Use	When not to Use	Example from Transcripts
Toxic Environments	Organizational Behaviors and Conditions Existing (Org Behavior)	Organizational behaviors and attributes exhibited where toxic leaders exist.	When referring to the climate, perceptions, feelings, and observations of the working and work-social environment. Also can relate to senior leadership's consistency in applying organizational values.	When describing current organizational efforts to retain associates or recommendations. Also, not when describing the climate as a consequence of the toxic behaviors.	"In my time underneath this particular leader, I noticed certain aspects of favoritism"; "If you were targeted, this person would have somewhat of a vendetta against you"; "it was a very tense environment"; "the company says they are servant leaders, and that is almost exactly the opposite of the behaviors shown"; "this is all hypocrisy, so I left"
	Consequences Due to Toxic Leadership (Org Consequence)	The consequences or effects due to the existence of toxic leadership or the organizational climate which allows such toxic behaviors.	When describing the effects on the organization that the toxic environment causes. Also includes biases that are allowed to exist.	When describing the causes for the consequences, nor recommendations to improve.	"the lack of trustworthiness and other issues with the integrity of this particular leader and the leaders above, you kind of lose respect from other departments, and you need that trust"; "it became very clear that one small lack of divulging certain information led to a lack of trust"; "I think it creates a lot of bitterness between the different departments"; "there's a lot of blaming and communication breakdowns"
Mitigation	Organizational Mitigation & Recovery Efforts (Action)	The specific efforts of the organization to prevent, dissuade, or mitigate toxic leadership from within the organization, or to address the specific needs of the individual associate.	When referring to efforts by the organization to help associates recover from, or navigate through toxic leader relationships. Also referring to the organizational efforts to own the causes or results of toxic leaders in the organization.	When referring to the over-arching cultural or organizational causes of the toxicity or the effects and consequences. When referring to recommendations to address said issues.	"so unfortunately, there's not a whole lot that's been done"; "in my opinion, maybe ignoring or sweeping the problem under the rug, trying to ignore the main underlying issue by just making the problem smaller, doesn't really make the problem go away"; it's understood that there's probably not going to be anything substantially done"
	Organizational Ownership of Circumstances (Ownership)	Specifically addressing the acknowledgement of the toxic environment and leaders, and the organizations ownership of a path to move forward.	When referring to the organization's acknowledgement that toxic leaders or environments did, or do, exist. Public or private acknowledgment of the variance between specific toxic leader behaviors and the organizational values.	When reviewing conducive organizational cultures and consequences; or actions towards mitigating or recovering from such outcomes. Also includes recommendations to retain associates.	"there was an instance where an issue was addressed publicly to the department, not necessarily to the organization, but to the department; and they somewhat softened it, and painted it in a kind of neutral light."; "I've never see any other public acknowledgement of like: 'this is the leader that we do want, this is the leader we don't want', or these are the cultural norms that we want to have"
Retention & Recovery	Participant Coping Mechanisms (Coping)	Specific actions and/or behaviors by individuals (instinctual or on-purpose) as a reaction to the toxic behavior and/or culture that allows it.	When reviewing the specific individuals' methods for coping with the toxic behaviors or outcomes in their work environment.	Not referring to the organizational cultural generalities, nor the organizational steps taken to overcome said toxic behaviors or consequences.	"some of the folks that I've seen interact, they've just been very loud and obnoxious, and I think that's their way of expressing frustration"; "I created a support group. It was like, not, this is what's going on. There is a name for it, it's called gas lighting"
	Observed Associate Retention Efforts (Retention)	Referring to either the justifications by the individual to stay (or go) while within a toxic environment, or the on-purpose efforts made by the organization to retain associates from said environments.	When reviewing the decision-making process for an associate to stay or leave and organization, and any active efforts that the organization makes to retain the associate.	Not referring to any culture cause and effect, nor more global acknowledgement or recovery efforts by the organization. Also does not include recommendations for retention.	"provides financial stability, it provides a work-life stability and unfortunately, that's probably the only thing that's keeping them there"; "They largely feel like they won't be able to find something else"; I would say all of us were kind of talking and many were looking for jobs"; "they can intimidate you to not move on"
	Participant Recommendations (Recommendations)	Recommendations provided by participants for organizational recovery and retention efforts.	When reviewing specific statements of recommendation on how organizations can recover their cultures post-toxic leader, and to more effectively retain the associate population.	Not referring to any causal factors, nor directly addressing any justification for previous actions by the organization or affected individual.	"At the first instance of toxic behavior or toxic leadership, address it"; "this sounds really obvious and dumb, but give some leadership training to folks who are in areas of position authority"; "so I think that organizations really need to find a way to create a safe space for people to talk. Again, a real open door policy"