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Steven Walker

Daryl Watkins

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Shadows of Leadership: The Lived Experiences of Oppressed Followers of Toxic Leaders

**Steven Walker
National University**

**Daryl Watkins
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University**

Toxic leadership has been shown to have devastating effects on employee performance and also detrimental impacts on employee psychological and emotional health (Einarsen et al., 2010; Kelloway & Barling, 2010; Mackie, 2008; Tepper, 2007). This qualitative research study investigates the experiences of toxic leadership in organizations reported by 175 followers. Follower experiences were analyzed through NVivo. Various themes of toxic leadership emerged, and a model of toxic leadership was created. This paper will discuss the findings of this study.

Keywords: toxic leadership model, destructive leadership

INTRODUCTION

Since business relations are constantly developing in our globalized world, investigating the subject of leadership remains particularly important, thus, it is covered by scholars and academics worldwide (Friedman & Gerstein, 2017; Matos, O’Neil, & Lei, 2018; Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, & Akehurst, 2016; Kendrick, 2017). The reason is that leadership within an organization is one of the key ingredients for building a high-performance culture, which is, however, still elusive to many organizations (Anjum & Ming, 2018). Therefore, understanding how to implement a successful leadership strategy can be even more important than building successful technological, financial, and operational programs. On the other hand, dysfunctional and toxic leadership may affect the organization in the opposite way and, consequently, lead to negative organizational outcomes such as poor performance, low morale, and high turnover. It is true that successful companies are successful due to various reasons; however toxic leadership is a lead predictor for organizational dysfunction (Kendrick, 2017; Wegge, Shemla, & Haslam, 2014; Rasool, Naseer, Syed, & Ahmad, 2018; Han, Harms, & Bai, 2017).

Since toxic leadership may harm any organization in its attempt to create a successful business, the subject has been explored by numerous scholars for years. The term toxic is defined by Hickman (2010) as, “acting or having the effect of a poison” (p. 390). Hickman (2010) defines this type of leader as one who, “lacks self-control...aided...by followers unwilling or unable effectively to intervene” and is “...uncaring or unkind. Ignor[ing] or discount[ing]...the needs, wants, and wishes of...member” (Hickman, 2010, p. 397).

Toxic leadership has also been described as inflicting intense and lasting damage by exhibiting destructive behaviors and other dysfunctional personal qualities to those they intend to control, as well as others who may be indirectly impacted (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 19). The behaviors or personal characteristics “must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations” (p. 386). The label of “seriously toxic leaders” is reserved for those who act with an intent to harm or to enhance the self at the expense of others, since some toxic leaders are blissfully unaware of how their incompetence hurts their subordinates and organizations (p. 386). Toxic leaders manipulate, oppress, deceive, and incompetently lead with ego and imprudent ambition (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The result of these behaviors could cause irreversible harm to the team and to the organizational culture, as staff may become disenchanted with their roles and hostile, which is easily transmitted to other staff (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Across the world, every business is attempting to boost the productivity and growth rate, but the fate and success of an organization is decided by the type of work environment in which it operates (Anjum & Ming, 2018). According to Friedman and Gerstein (2017), there is a crisis of leadership that is impacting organizational environments in negative ways. This leadership crisis stems from a style of leadership that is self-centered, egotistical, value-less, and concerned with profits over people (Friedman & Gerstein, 2017). The younger generation of employees is especially concerned and uninspired by this toxic and value-less leadership style (Friedman & Gerstein, 2017). One of the reasons these value-less leaders rise to power could be due to the emergent leadership traits that can accompany those individuals with toxic leadership styles, low emotional intelligence, and narcissistic personality disorder (Matos, O’Neil, & Lei, 2018; Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, & Akehurst, 2016).

A study done by de Vries (2018) suggested that when toxic leadership traits merged with extroverted personality styles and low emotional intelligence, extremely toxic organizational outcomes and consequences are the result. De Vries references several traits that are especially harmful to employee satisfaction; which are dishonesty, disagreeableness, and carelessness. The negative trait of dishonesty includes other such traits as insincerity, unfairness, greed, and immodesty. Disagreeableness included other traits such as unforgiveable, overly critical, inflexible, and impatient. Carelessness included other such traits as sloppiness, laziness, negligent, and impulsive. All of these various traits combined with that of extroversion can create a leader that is toxic, valueless, and selfish (de Vries, 2018), which leads to negative organizational outcomes.

These negative organizational outcomes include lower morale, lower levels of productivity, and higher turnover (Cote, 2018; Friedman & Gerstein, 2017; Mohiuddin, 2017). According to Kendrick (2017) and Rousseau and Aube (2018), there are several long-term negative effects due to low morale. These are: anger and resentment, mistrust, reduced confidence, stalled career development, negative physical health conditions, and negative mental health conditions (Kendrick, 2017, p. 852).

Additionally, a study done by Dobbs and Do (2019) applied a toxic leadership framework from an organizational and leadership perspective to assess the relationship between perceived toxic leadership and organizational cynicism. Dobbs and Do’s (2019) results revealed a positive relationship between toxic leadership and organizational contempt, such that those who report having leaders with toxic qualities are likely to have harmful feelings toward their organization.

Similarly, Gabriel (2016) conducted a study to empirically examine the association of supervisors’ toxicity and subordinates’ counter-productive work-behavior. Gabriel’s study concluded that followers are swift to counter supervisors’ toxicity through inefficient work- behavior such as shifting anger to either peers or other identifiable assets of the organization. Gabriel (2016) further argued for a sensitive approach in the leader-follower relationships with prominence on the training and retraining of leaders regarding emotional intelligence.

Parmer and Dillard (2019) also examined the relationship between the perceptions followers have regarding how they are treated in the workplace environment by their current or most recent leader, and

how these follower perceptions predicted feelings of power within themselves. What Parmer and Dillard found was that “employees’ perceptions and attitudes regarding their immediate supervisor can create positive or negative feelings toward the supervisor which can, in turn, affect the organization’s culture and workplace environment, both good and bad” (p. 14). Wegge, Shemla, and Haslam (2014), Rasool, Naseer, Syed, and Ahmad (2018), and Han, Harms, and Bai (2017), came to similar conclusions in their studies that looked at various leadership styles and their impacts on overall employee health, wellness, creativity, and productivity. Their findings suggested that the impact of an unethical and negative style of leadership, and the corrupt environment that this kind of leadership creates, has deleterious effects on the employee’s ability to perform well or demonstrate out of the box thinking in the form of creativity (Wegge, Shemla, & Haslam, 2014; Rasool, Naseer, Syed, & Ahmad, 2018; Han, Harms, & Bai, 2017). Psychologists have also found that negative emotions are especially contagious and have an overwhelmingly adverse effect on moods (Daft, 2015).

On the other hand, researchers such as Maamari and Majdalani (2017), Rosete and Ciarrochi (2005), and Wong and Law (2002) have found that leadership high in emotional intelligence improves the overall performance of employees. According to Daft (2015), “Emotional intelligence refers to a person’s abilities to perceive, identify, understand, and successfully manage emotions in self and others” (p. 146). Leaders with higher levels of emotional intelligence understand how to delegate work and motivate employees in ways that maximize their potential (Maamari & Majdalani, 2017, p. 338).

A leader’s emotional state affects the performance of his/her employees, if he/she is in a happy mood the people around him/her view things in a more positive way, they become more optimistic, efficient and creative. The contrary is true when the emotional state of the leader is negative, it will create a dysfunctional environment. (p. 338)

Freidman and Gerstein (2017) also contended it is important for organizations to practice compassion, empathy, and caring and make them core values. According to Friedman and Gerstein this means organizations that want to thrive must be run by compassionate leaders and that a culture of compassion and caring must permeate the entire organization. This is especially crucial in toxic organizations and/or where employees are disengaged.

METHODS

The purpose of the current study was to examine the phenomenon of toxic leadership through the lens of followers. Between 2015 and 2019, 175 students enrolled in LED 603, Leadership in the 21st Century, a required course for a Master of Science in Leadership program. The students were required to write a paper in response to the prompt: “Describe your experience with toxic leadership.” The students had the shared experience of one week in the LED 603 course to develop their academic understanding of toxic leadership based on course readings and presentations.

The lead researcher obtained University IRB approval to conduct the current research using archival course documents. One hundred seventy-five LED 603 students wrote about toxic leaders between 2015 and 2019. Topically, participants wrote about specific toxic leaders whom they had worked for, historical figures or famous leaders who were considered toxic leaders, or general characteristics of toxic leaders without reference to individual leaders. Because the current research sought to understand toxic leadership through the lens of followers, the researchers rejected papers that did not describe a toxic leader or toxic environment based on the direct knowledge or experience of the participant. Of the 175 submissions, the research team retained 130 relevant papers, importing those papers as cases into NVivo 12 software for thematic analysis. One researcher sanitized each case by removing cover pages, introductions, conclusions, references, and other content that was not related to the toxic leader or situation.

RESULTS

The researchers coded each case using the automatic feature of NVivo to get a sense of the general themes and then manually coded the cases to develop a comprehensive database of themes and subthemes.

Automatically Coded Themes and Subthemes

NVivo’s automatic coding routine yielded eleven themes: behavior, employees, environment, leaders, leadership, manager, personal, toxic, toxic leader, toxic leadership, and work. Table 1 provides the number of cases and the references within cases for each theme.

TABLE 1
NVIVO AUTOMATICALLY CODED THEMES

Theme	Subthemes	Cases	References
Behavior	47	53	91
Employees	67	40	77
Environment	42	56	86
Leaders	120	99	281
Leadership	126	107	308
Manager	73	52	108
Personal	59	54	102
Toxic	62	101	264
Toxic leader	7	54	82
Toxic leadership	12	56	89
Work	68	67	117

Each of the automatically coded themes contained numerous subthemes. For example, there were 47 automatically coded subthemes within the behavior theme and 120 subthemes within the leadership theme. The Cases column refers to the number of papers where NVivo automatically coded each theme. The References column refers to the number of times that the themes were automatically coded within the total number of cases.

The automatic coding produced several useful subthemes. Many “behavior” subthemes related to types of toxic behaviors that participants reported. Some of the “employee” subthemes related to participants’ responses. The “environment” subthemes were descriptive of the types of toxic environments encountered. The “leaders,” “leadership,” “management,” “toxic,” “toxic leader,” and “toxic leadership” themes contained subthemes that described toxic leader styles, characteristics, traits, and behaviors. The “personal” theme related to toxic personality descriptors. Finally, the “work” theme contained subthemes related to toxic characteristics of the workplace.

Manual Coding

Manual Coded Themes and Subthemes

The researchers completed an initial review of the documents to develop a general understanding of the data. Three broad categories emerged related to toxic leader behaviors, toxic organizational climates, and outcomes of toxic situations. Within these categories, the researchers coded and organized nodes into themes and subthemes.

The first category, toxic leader behaviors, were actions that participants perceived to be toxic or that created a toxic environment. Toxic leader behaviors included the themes of aberrant behaviors, abuse of

power, egocentrism, emotional dysregulation, ineffective leader behaviors, and moral corruption. The researchers divided the six themes of toxic leader behaviors into subthemes. The “aberrant” theme included subthemes of narcissism and paranoia. The “abuse of power” theme included abuse of positional authority and degrading. The “egocentrism” theme included claiming other’s ideas, favoritism, greed, hypocrisy, selfishness, suspicion, and transference. The “emotional dysregulation” theme included subthemes of lacking emotional intelligence, lacking emotional regulation, lacking empathy, and lashing out and punishing. The “ineffective leader behaviors” theme included blaming, ignoring feedback, infighting, jumping to conclusions, lacking military bearing, micromanaging, overreacting, setting unclear expectations, and setting unrealistic targets. Finally, the “moral corruption” theme contained subthemes of discrimination, instilling fear, systemic oppression, threatening, and unethical. Some remarks coded under multiple subthemes. For example, the following passage was coded under the subthemes “ignoring feedback” and “claiming others ideas”:

I had a manager whom [*sic*] only cared about his own opinion and did not listen to feedback. The organization I worked in valued all employee feedback and most would provide ways to improve workplace procedure and involvement. We took this feedback to our manager, but he completely disregarded it. If he did take the feedback, he claimed it as his own.

The second category, toxic organizational climates, consisted of the organizational climate themes of attitudes, collective behaviors, and feelings that participants described. The “attitude” theme included subthemes of low morale, low motivation, low trust. The “collective behaviors” theme included subthemes of avoidance, emotional contagion, ganging up, internal struggle, and selective accountability. The “feelings” theme included subthemes of apathy, fear, frustration, hopelessness, humiliation, inadequacy, miserableness, resentment, and stress.

Participants shared four different reactions to toxic situations. They sometimes deployed coping mechanism such as strengthening their bonds with other oppressed followers, survived the situation through increased dedication to the mission, or they took the situation in stride. They also described situations in which the toxic leaders created environments that recruited other leaders and followers, resulting in a snowball effect where others began to participate in the toxic behavior. Some participants described confronting or talking to toxic leaders to attempt to resolve the situations. Finally, some participants described stepping up and confronting toxic leaders head-on.

The last category, outcomes, contained the themes of organizational outcomes and personal outcomes. The “organizational outcomes” theme consisted of the subthemes attrition, division of followers, inefficiency, lack of respect, lack of unit discipline, making mistakes, snowball effect, strengthened bonds, and the toxic leader was fired. The “personal outcomes” themes contained subthemes of the follower spoke to the toxic leader, stepped up, survived through dedication, took it in stride, and reflection. Participants sometimes wrote about how toxic situations had resolved.

DISCUSSION

The current study examines the phenomena of toxic leadership. The researchers reviewed 175 cases of toxic leadership reported through the lens of students in a Masters of Leadership Program. The current study supported literature that toxic leader behaviors have detrimental effects on the psychological and emotional health of their followers (Anjum & Ming, 2018; Wegge, Shemla, & Haslem, 2014; Han, Harms, & Bai, 2017). The study also provided evidence supporting the toxic leadership literature that toxic leadership poisons organizational climates and devalues organizational outcomes (Kendrick, 2017; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Gabriel, 2016).

Toxic Leader Behaviors

The automatic and manual coding exercises revealed numerous leader behaviors that participants perceived as toxic. The automatic coding revealed 47 toxic leader subthemes, of which 24 subthemes contained negative sentiment. As previously discussed, we manually grouped toxic leader behaviors into six themes, which we further divided into 29 subthemes. We compared the automatically-generated and manually-generated themes and found that the manual themes provided superior insight and context over the manually-generated themes.

Some toxic leaders demonstrated behaviors that participants suggested could be classified as clinical disorders and in some cases as morally corrupt. These toxic leaders would certainly fall into the label of seriously toxic leaders, as described by Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, & Akehurst (2016). Some participants reported that toxic leaders abused their power and authority and degraded their followers. Many participants described egocentric behavior that suggested toxic leaders who were more concerned with their own needs than the needs of their followers or their organizations. The previous two themes demonstrate the negative traits of dishonesty, disagreeableness, and carelessness reported by de Vries (2018). Some participants also described toxic leaders who could not regulate their emotions and who lacked empathy for their followers. Other behaviors were more typical of new or inexperienced leaders. One possible explanation for this behavior lies in the way that military organizations place new officers with experienced enlisted personnel. Those senior enlisted personnel might be likely to notice and report ineffective leader behaviors.

The gamut of negative behaviors ranged from self-serving and petty to demeaning and unlawful. One participant wrote about a supervisor who

would degrade me in front of others for simple mistakes (which others made all the time). He would deny requests that I would make, while approving the same requests made by [a colleague]. Someone who was supposed to be my leader, the one I look up to, unjustly discriminated against me.

Another participant wrote about a particularly dark environment:

The lack of discipline, subordinates' fear, and respect for the uniform destroyed my unit from the inside out. People felt they would not be held accountable for their actions, so they raped, did drugs, were drunk and disorderly, and failed to maintain their warfighting standards.

Some situations left a significant emotional mark on the participants and contributed to harmful outcomes for the organizations.

Due to the excessive self-rewarded bonuses, we were running out of money in the department and soon had to downsize. This is where things really started to hit the fan. Management was on the verge of being investigated. In the meantime, employee layoffs were like a game of musical chairs. If you came into the office and had a box on your desk, it was your turn to go. Everyone who backed management up basically had immunity from layoff until the very end.

The participant indicated that the management team was corrupt and playing favorites. The unethical behavior contributed to a toxic environment in which management fired employees who followed the rules while rewarding those who played along with the unethical behavior with bonuses and job security. Thus the situation created personal distress and, ultimately, organizational failure, consistent with themes outlined in the literature (Cote, 2018; Friedman & Gerstein, 2017; Mohiuddin, 2017).

Organizational Climate and Outcomes

As previously discussed, toxic leadership is a lead predictor for organizational dysfunction (Mohiuddin, 2017; Matos, O' Neill, & Lei, 2018). Organizational climate consists of collective attitudes, behaviors, and feelings towards the organization. The participants in the current study described attitudes of low morale, motivation, and trust. Participants and their colleagues experienced feelings of apathy, fear, frustration, hopelessness, humiliation, inadequacy, miserableness, resentment, and stress. Some participants described collective behaviors of avoidance, emotional contagion, ganging up, internal struggle, and selective accountability. A toxic leader poisons the organizational climate and, if left unchecked, will eventually destroy the culture.

The participants observed destructive organizational outcomes such as attrition, division of followers, inefficiency, lack of respect, lack of unit discipline, errors, snowball effects, and the firing of the toxic leader. In response to these outcomes, some participants reported that they attempted to speak to the toxic leader in an attempt to resolve the situation. Some reported stepping up and providing alternative leadership to the toxic leader. For example,

I did not end up getting any recognition, however, the way in which I lead (in the very limited way I could) changed. I started to actively lead from the front. I took initiative, questioned bad orders, and paved a road that ultimately lead [*sic*] the way to the leader I have become today.

Some participants described how they survived the situation by dedicating themselves to the organization and putting up with the behavior or taking the toxic leadership in stride. Finally, some participants described how they did not realize until further reflection that they were involved in a toxic situation until after they left the organization.

Towards a New Model of Toxic Leadership

As we uncovered themes and subthemes, a model of toxic leadership emerged. It became evident that some participants labeled a leader's actions as toxic, where other followers involved with that situation might not have considered the actions to be toxic. Thus, the toxic environment develops from the interaction of the leader with a follower or group of followers and the perceptions of those followers about the intentions and reasons for the leader's actions. We intend to report on this model as we validate through future research.

Consider a performance improvement conversation between a manager and a subordinate. The subordinate's view of that conversation might depend on a host of factors, some of which are outside of the manager's control or knowledge. Both the manager and the subordinate react to the situation and to each other in real time. Each picks up cues such as body language, tone, and inflection from the other. Each has private intentions and circumstances that might affect the conversation (e.g., one has not eaten all day) and each has a view of whatever led up to the conversation. It is easy to see how either might view something as negative that was not intended as it came across. These situations can then turn into a downward spiral of negative emotions that result in a toxic label. Over time, the employee could conclude that he or she is operating in a toxic environment. On the other hand, if the employee believed that the leader were making a reasonable and bonafide attempt to help, he or she would not likely label the environment. Thus, whether an employee views an environment as toxic is heavily influenced by how the employee perceives the leader's intentions, whether positive or negative.

LIMITATIONS

The sample for the current study consisted of students taking a Master of Science in Leadership program. The researchers did not collect demographic data such as age, race, ethnicity, or gender. The results of this study may have been skewed because the participants shared common characteristics such as

their status as graduate students, geographic proximity, age, or gender. This limitation is mitigated in part as students did come from a wide range of industries and backgrounds.

The participants also shared the experience of one week of experience in the LED 603 course. Participants may have primed to report certain behaviors or experiences because of their shared understanding of course readings, lectures, and discussions. The longitudinal nature of the study mitigates this limitation since the lead researcher gathered the cases over five years and several LED 603 class sections.

Participants in the study were graduate students at a University based in the south-western United States. The University has a large population of military and veteran students because of its proximity to military bases and retirement communities. Many participants in the study reported toxic situations that occurred while they were in the military. There is a chance that military members view toxic leaders and environments differently than their civilian counterparts view toxic leaders and environments. While this is not necessarily a limitation, further research may need to validate similarities and differences between the military and civilian contexts.

CONCLUSION

Applying a qualitative method, the experience of toxic leadership has been captured. This study shows that numerous fields are not immune to the experience of toxic leadership. The experience of toxic and oppressive leadership is one that leads to low morale, feelings of betrayal, mistrust, and workplace abuse; which includes emotional, verbal/written abuse, system abuse, and psychological abuse.

This study reveals that the perpetrators of workplace mistreatment come in all forms and within various organizational fields. Individuals who experience toxic leadership exhibit numerous negative emotional, physical, and cognitive symptoms; they begin to disengage from their work, experience anxiety and high stress, can attempt to sabotage the leader and/or organization, and actively separate themselves from the organizations they are a part of. Additionally, the oppressed followers can begin to doubt their career choices and eventually try to escape their experience, often with long-term effects that endure years after the event has ended. They do, however, appear to recognize that their experience with leadership toxicity has made them better leaders themselves.

The data collected in this study was rich and offers plentiful areas of further study, including the effect of age and its correlation to perceptions of toxic leadership, the effect of context (military, civilian, personality styles, etc.) on toxic leadership experiences, how demographics such as age, gender, race, religion, etc. effect the study results, and why toxic leaders are motivated in the first place to act oppressively toward their followers. The study also offers implications for the creation of a model that portrays the toxic leader experience, and expanded professional development, especially concerning ethics, leadership, and mentoring.

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