TOXIC LEADERSHIP: CONSEQUENCES FOR EMPLOYEE WELLBEING AND TURNOVER INTENTIONS

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Abstract

Toxic leadership, characterized by destructive behaviors such as bullying, narcissism, and unpredictability, poses a severe threat to organizational health. This article examines its profound consequences, arguing that such leadership directly and indirectly erodes employee wellbeing and fuels turnover intentions. The analysis demonstrates that toxic leaders actively push employees out by creating a hostile environment, while simultaneously dissolving the pull of loyalty and commitment. This dual assault manifests in significant psychological distress, physical health issues, and social strain for employees. Crucially, the pathway to turnover often involves presenteeism—a costly period of disengagement. The article concludes that proactive organizational intervention, including leader accountability and robust employee support systems, is not merely beneficial but essential to mitigate these damaging effects and safeguard both human capital and operational integrity.

Keywords: *Toxic Leadership, Employee Wellbeing, Turnover Intentions, Presenteeism, Psychological Safety.*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership stands as one of the most critical determinants of organizational success, fundamentally shaping culture, driving employee morale, and influencing performance outcomes. Effective leaders inspire, empower, and guide their teams toward shared objectives, fostering an environment of trust and innovation (Anyanugo et al., 2024). The pervasive impact of leadership touches every aspect of the employee experience, from daily task management to long-term career development, making it a cornerstone of a healthy and productive workplace. However, this profound influence is not inherently positive (Sharma & Patel, 2025). While the virtues of transformational and ethical leadership are well-documented, a parallel reality exists in the form of its destructive counterpart: toxic leadership. This dark side of leadership manifests through behaviors such as bullying, narcissism, public humiliation, and unpredictable decision-making. Rather than building up employees, a toxic leader systematically undermines their subordinates, eroding trust and psychological safety (Alodhiani, 2024). This destructive force poses a significant threat to both individual and organizational health, creating a climate of fear and self-preservation that stifles collaboration and growth (Zhang, 2024).

The consequences of such leadership extend far beyond momentary dissatisfaction, triggering a cascade of negative outcomes that impact the entire organization. When exposed to toxicity, employees often experience severe declines in their mental and physical wellbeing, including chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout (Rajiv Nadkar et al., 2023). This deterioration in wellbeing is not contained within the individual; it translates into tangible organizational costs, such as increased absenteeism, rampant presenteeism (where employees are physically present but mentally disengaged), and a sharp decline in overall productivity and quality of work (Mardian, 2024). Despite the known importance of effective leadership, many organizations continue to suffer the significant financial and human costs associated with toxic leaders, including soaring healthcare expenses due to employee stress, the hidden productivity loss of presenteeism, and the direct costs of high employee turnover such as recruitment, onboarding, and the irreversible loss of institutional knowledge. The primary objective of this article is to systematically analyze the mechanisms through which toxic leadership behaviors directly and indirectly lead to weakened employee wellbeing and increased turnover intentions. This paper posits that toxic leadership serves as a primary stressor, which erodes

employee wellbeing through mediating pathways such as the destruction of psychological safety and the onset of emotional exhaustion, thereby compelling employees to actively seek alternative employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Deconstructing Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is best understood as a persistent, destructive behavior pattern that poisons the organizational environment and harms subordinates' well-being. To precisely define it, we must contrast it with related, yet distinct, concepts. While abusive supervision specifically refers to the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact, toxic leadership is broader, encompassing both active hostility and profound negligence (Singh et al., 2019). Destructive leadership is an overarching term that includes behaviors that harm the organization itself, such as fraud, whereas toxic leadership is primarily focused on the damage inflicted upon followers. Furthermore, traits like narcissistic leadership are often a component of toxicity, but a toxic leader may not be clinically narcissistic; their destructiveness can also stem from deep-seated insecurity, a lack of skill, or a singular focus on results at any human cost. Therefore, toxic leadership is characterized by its core outcome: the systematic degradation and demoralization of team members (Milosevic et al., 2020).

The behavioral manifestations of toxic leadership are varied but consistently damaging. Key traits include bullying, intimidation, and public humiliation, which are used to assert dominance and control through fear. This is often coupled with pronounced narcissism and self-promotion, where the leader prioritizes their own image and credit, leading to the frequent exploitation of subordinates (Octavian, 2023). Unpredictability and erratic behavior create a climate of chronic anxiety, as employees are unable to anticipate reactions or decisions, walking on eggshells to avoid triggering an outburst. Authoritarian control and a complete lack of empowerment stifle innovation and initiative, reducing employees to mere executors of orders without input. Finally, a classic trait is the leader's tendency to take credit for others' work while swiftly blaming others for their own failures or mistakes, which systematically destroys trust, fairness, and any sense of shared purpose within the team (Gupta & Chawla, 2024).

Employee Wellbeing: A Multifaceted Concept

Employee wellbeing is a holistic state that encompasses an individual's overall physical, mental, and emotional health in the context of their work environment. It extends far beyond mere job satisfaction to include a person's fundamental quality of life. This multifaceted concept can be broken down into several interconnected domains (Okray & Hüseyinzade Şimşek, 2020). Psychological wellbeing involves an employee's mental and emotional state, which can be severely compromised by a toxic environment, leading to chronic stress, pervasive anxiety, feelings of depression, and a eroded sense of self-worth. Physical wellbeing refers to the body's condition, where psychological distress frequently manifests as somatic symptoms, including persistent headaches, gastrointestinal issues, sleep disturbances like insomnia, and a constant state of fatigue and exhaustion (Westover, 2025).

The third critical domain is professional wellbeing, which relates to an employee's experience and perception of their work. This includes their level of job satisfaction, their emotional and cognitive engagement with their tasks, and their sense of accomplishment and purpose. When professional wellbeing is high, employees feel motivated, valued, and connected to their work (Milosevic et al., 2020). However, these domains do not exist in isolation; they are deeply intertwined. For instance, a decline in psychological wellbeing due to constant stress (e.g., from an unpredictable leader) can lead to physical symptoms like insomnia, which in turn reduces energy levels and concentration, directly harming professional wellbeing by causing disengagement and a loss of accomplishment. This cascade effect illustrates how a toxic work environment can trigger a downward spiral, adversely affecting the whole person (Rajiv Nadkar et al., 2023).

Turnover Intentions: The Final Warning Sign

Turnover intention is defined as the conscious and deliberate willfulness of an employee to leave their current organization. It represents the final cognitive and psychological step before the actual act of resignation, encapsulating the employee's thought process of planning, desiring, and actively considering departure (Lazzari et al., 2022). This intention is not a fleeting moment of frustration but a calculated response to sustained negative workplace experiences. It is a clear signal that the psychological contract between the employee and the employer has been broken, and the individual has begun to seek alternatives, mentally disengaging from their current role and reducing their organizational commitment long before they formally resign (Dhoopar et al., 2025). In organizational research, turnover intention is recognized as the strongest and most reliable predictor of actual voluntary employee departure. While not every employee who intends to leave will immediately do so (due to factors like job market conditions or personal obligations), the intention is a necessary precursor to voluntary turnover (Shinde, 2025).

Studying turnover intentions is therefore critically valuable for organizations, as it serves as an early warning system—a measurable indicator of deep-seated problems within a team or company culture. By the time an employee updates their resume and begins interviewing, the organization has already failed to retain them. Consequently, understanding the drivers of turnover intention, such as toxic leadership, provides a crucial opportunity for intervention before the costly process of actual turnover, with its associated recruitment and training expenses and loss of institutional knowledge, is set in motion (Westover, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This article is conceived as a critical review, rather than a systematic review, aiming to provide a conceptual synthesis and analytical critique of the existing body of literature on toxic leadership. The methodology is therefore interpretive and argument-driven, focusing on engaging with key theories, seminal works, and empirical studies to construct a coherent narrative about the consequences for employee wellbeing and turnover. The selection of literature was not based on an exhaustive, protocol-driven search but was guided by the objective of identifying influential and representative scholarship that illuminates the defining characteristics of toxic leadership and its psychosocial impact on employees.

The analytical approach involves a thematic and theoretical analysis of the selected literature. This entails critically evaluating the conceptual frameworks that link toxic leadership to employee outcomes, examining the proposed mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety and emotional exhaustion, and synthesizing these insights into a proposed pathway model. The purpose is not to aggregate quantitative data but to interrogate the logical coherence of existing arguments, identify overarching themes and contradictions across studies, and highlight significant gaps in understanding. Through this critical dialogue with the literature, the review seeks to advance conceptual clarity and generate insightful propositions for both future research and practical application.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Impact on Employee Wellbeing

The impact of toxic leadership on employee wellbeing is profound and systemic, beginning with severe psychological consequences. Constant exposure to a leader's bullying, unpredictability, and humiliation creates a state of chronic stress, as employees remain in a heightened state of alertness, anticipating the next criticism or outburst (Shinde, 2025). This relentless pressure frequently escalates into more serious conditions, including clinical anxiety disorders, symptoms of depression such as persistent sadness and hopelessness, and significant emotional fragility, where individuals feel drained, overwhelmed, and unable to cope with minor setbacks. The workplace, under such conditions, is transformed from a source of potential fulfillment into a primary cause of psychological distress, systematically eroding an employee's mental health and self-esteem (Westover, 2025).

This psychological deterioration inevitably manifests in physical and social domains. The constant activation of the body's stress response can lead to a weakened immune system, making employees more susceptible to frequent illnesses, as well as more serious cardiovascular issues like hypertension. Furthermore, mental turmoil often results in significant sleep disturbances, including insomnia or restless sleep, which creates a vicious cycle of fatigue and reduced resilience. The damage also spills over into an employee's social world, straining relationships with colleagues as a climate of fear and competition replaces one of collaboration and trust (Westover, 2025). Perhaps more insidiously, the emotional exhaustion and irritability follow the employee home, leading to increased conflict and withdrawal within family and personal relationships, effectively isolating the individual and diminishing their external support systems at a time when they are needed most (Octavian, 2023).

Table 1. The Impact of Toxic Leadership on Employee Wellbeing

| Domain of Wellbeing	Manifestations & Symptoms	Description & Consequences
Psychological	Chronic Stress	Constant exposure to a toxic leader creates a heightened state of alertness, leading to severe mental health consequences. This transforms the workplace into a primary source of psychological distress, systematically eroding an employee's mental health and self-esteem.
	Anxiety Disorders	
	Symptoms of Depression	
	Emotional Fragility	
Physical	Weakened Immune System	The relentless activation of the body's stress response leads to tangible physical ailments. Sleep problems create a vicious cycle of fatigue and reduced resilience, making it harder to cope with the psychological demands.
	Cardiovascular Issues (e.g., hypertension)	
	Sleep Disturbances (e.g., insomnia)	
	Fatigue	
Social	Strained Colleague Relationships	The climate of fear and competition damages workplace collaboration. The emotional exhaustion also "spills over" into an employee's personal life, damaging crucial external support systems at a time when they are most needed.
	Conflict in Family/Personal Relationships	
	Social Withdrawal & Isolation	

The provided table as shown in table 1 effectively synthesizes the multifaceted detrimental impact of toxic leadership by systematically categorizing the consequences into three interconnected domains of employee wellbeing: psychological, physical, and social. It clearly illustrates how the root cause of toxic behaviors—such as bullying and unpredictability—manifests in specific, severe symptoms like chronic stress, anxiety, a weakened immune system, and strained relationships (Mardian, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Furthermore, the table moves beyond merely listing symptoms by describing the consequential outcomes, such as the erosion of self-esteem, the creation of a vicious cycle of fatigue, and the critical erosion of an employee's social support network. This structured presentation underscores that the harm caused by toxic leadership is not confined to a single aspect of an employee's life but is a holistic assault that permeates their entire existence, ultimately crippling both individual and organizational health (Sharma & Patel, 2025).

The Pathway to Turnover

The pathway from toxic leadership to actual turnover is navigated through two powerful, interrelated forces: the "push" and the "lack of pull." The "push" factor is an active, expulsive force driven by the hostile work environment itself. Employees are not merely deciding to leave; they are being actively driven away by the daily reality of intimidation, unfairness, and psychological harm (Reyhanoglu & Akin, 2022). This push is so powerful that employees often choose to leave even without another job secured, viewing unemployment as a preferable alternative to their current suffering. It is a decision rooted in the urgent need to escape a damaging situation for the sake of one's own wellbeing (Gravili et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, the "pull" factors that traditionally bind an employee to an organization—such as loyalty, commitment, and a sense of shared purpose—dissolve under toxic leadership. When trust is broken and contributions are devalued, the emotional connection to the company and its mission withers, leaving no positive reason to stay (Iqbal et al., 2022). In the interim period between forming the intention to leave and securing a new role, "presenteeism" becomes rampant. Employees are physically present but mentally and emotionally disengaged, performing at a minimal level while diverting their energy into covertly job-seeking. This state is costly for organizations, as it represents a significant loss of productivity and innovation from employees who are still on the payroll, making presenteeism the final, silent symptom of a workforce in the advanced stages of flight (Labrague et al., 2020).

The chart as shown in Figure 1 effectively illustrates the psychological and behavioral process through which toxic leadership catalyzes employee turnover, mapping it as a direct causal pathway. It begins with the root cause—toxic leadership—which then bifurcates into the two core mechanisms of action: the active "push" of a hostile environment and the passive erosion of "pull" factors like loyalty and trust (Reyhanoglu & Akin, 2022). Visually converging these two forces into an "Urgent Desire to ESCAPE" powerfully demonstrates how they combine to create a singular, powerful motivation to leave. The chart is particularly insightful for highlighting the costly intermediate stage of "Presenteeism," making the critical point that productivity loss and disengagement occur long before the physical departure of the employee. Ultimately, this visualization clarifies that turnover is not a sudden event but the final stage in a predictable sequence of deterioration, underscoring the urgent need for organizational intervention at the leadership level to break the cycle (Westover, 2025).
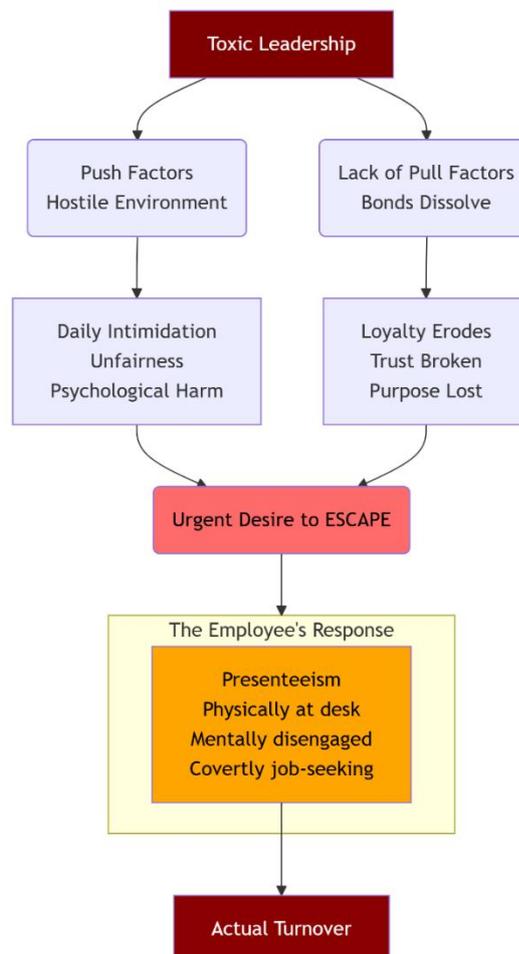
Figure 1. The Pathway from Toxic Leadership to Employee Turnover

Empowering Employees

A cornerstone of this empowerment is building personal and collective resilience through accessible resources for mental health and stress management. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are a vital first line of defense, offering confidential counseling, legal advice, and financial consulting that can help employees navigate the profound stress and anxiety induced by a hostile work environment (Attridge, 2023). Beyond EAPs, organizations can foster resilience by offering workshops on stress-management techniques, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence, which provide employees with practical skills to manage their psychological reactions, maintain a sense of self-worth, and prevent the complete internalization of the leader's toxicity (Wang et al., 2022).

Furthermore, fostering robust social support networks is a powerful antidote to the isolation that toxic leadership cultivates. When employees feel psychologically unsafe with their leader, strong peer and mentor relationships can provide a crucial buffer. Organizations can actively encourage this by creating formal mentorship programs that connect junior employees with trusted senior figures outside their direct chain of command, offering a safe space for guidance and validation (Attridge, 2023). Similarly, promoting team-building activities and collaborative projects that are not solely dependent on the toxic leader can help solidify peer bonds. These networks serve as an informal support system, allowing employees to share experiences, validate their perceptions of the toxicity, and receive the emotional sustenance needed to cope, thereby reducing the sense of isolation and powerlessness that often leads to burnout and departure (Gravili et al., 2022).

Table 2. Employee Empowerment Strategies to Mitigate Toxic Leadership

Empowerment Strategy	Specific Initiatives	Purpose & Benefit
Building Personal Resilience	Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs): Confidential counseling, legal/financial consulting. Workshops & Training: Stress-management, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence.	Provides tools and professional support to help employees manage psychological reactions, maintain self-worth, and prevent the internalization of toxicity, thereby reducing burnout.
Fostering Social Support Networks	Formal Mentorship Programs: Connecting employees with trusted senior figures outside their direct reporting line. Peer Support Initiatives: Team-building activities and collaborative projects independent of the toxic leader.	Creates a crucial buffer against isolation by offering safe spaces for guidance, validation, and shared experiences. This reduces powerlessness and provides essential emotional sustenance.

The provided table as shown in Table 2 offers a clear and actionable framework for understanding how organizations can proactively empower employees to counteract the detrimental effects of toxic leadership. It effectively categorizes interventions into two strategic pillars: "Building Personal Resilience," which focuses on equipping individuals with internal coping mechanisms through resources like EAPs and training, and "Fostering Social Support Networks," which aims to combat isolation by creating community through mentorship and peer bonds. By delineating specific initiatives alongside their respective purposes, the table moves beyond theoretical concepts to provide a practical guide for HR and management. This structured overview underscores that empowerment is not a singular action but a multi-faceted strategy, essential for mitigating the isolation and psychological harm caused by a toxic leader and thereby helping to preserve employee wellbeing and reduce turnover intentions.

The Role of HR

The Human Resources department holds a pivotal and proactive role in combating toxic leadership, moving beyond its traditional administrative functions to become a guardian of organizational health. This requires a shift from being reactive to predictive, actively monitoring the workplace climate rather than waiting for formal complaints (Gandolfi et al., 2024). HR can achieve this through regular, anonymous employee engagement and pulse surveys that specifically measure factors like psychological safety, perceptions of leadership, and team morale. This data serves as an early-warning system to identify teams with concerning trends long before they escalate into

widespread turnover or public scandals, allowing for timely and targeted intervention (Attridge, 2023). Once a potential issue is identified, HR must employ rigorous analytical tools, with exit interview analysis being particularly crucial. By systematically aggregating and analyzing data from departing employees, HR can move beyond individual anecdotes to identify patterns and pinpoint specific leaders or departments with abnormally high turnover rates and consistent negative feedback (Labrague et al., 2020). However, data collection is meaningless without consequential action. The final and most critical step is for HR, in partnership with senior leadership, to hold leaders accountable for their team's climate, not just their bottom-line results. This means tying leadership performance evaluations and compensation to measurable people-management metrics, initiating mandatory coaching for problematic leaders, and, as a last resort, enacting demotion or termination for those who persistently foster a toxic environment, thereby sending a clear message that the well-being of employees is a non-negotiable corporate value (Dhoopar et al., 2025; Lazzari et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evidence presented establishes a clear and compelling chain of causality: **toxic** leadership is a direct antecedent to severe employee psychological distress, physical health deterioration, and ultimately, the decision to leave the organization. Through the dual mechanisms of actively pushing employees away with hostility and eroding the positive bonds that pull them to stay, toxic leaders create an unsustainable work environment. The intervening stages of emotional exhaustion and presenteeism represent significant hidden costs, demonstrating that the damage is inflicted long before the actual turnover occurs. This analysis underscores that toxic leadership is not merely a interpersonal issue but a critical organizational risk factor that directly undermines human capital, operational stability, and financial performance.

Ultimately, addressing toxic leadership must be a strategic imperative. While individual resilience-building and social support can buffer the effects, the onus rests squarely on the organization to identify, remediate, and, if necessary, remove toxic leaders. Proactive measures—such as holistic leadership assessments, 360-degree feedback, and holding leaders accountable for their team's climate—are non-negotiable investments in organizational health. Fostering a culture of psychological safety and ethical leadership is not just a moral obligation but a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable success. By dismantling the environments that allow toxicity to thrive, organizations can protect their most valuable asset—their people—and secure a more productive, innovative, and resilient future.

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