Victims in the Dark Shadows: A Model of Toxic Leadership

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Walker and Watkins (2020) conducted a thematic analysis of the lived experiences of 130 oppressed followers of toxic leaders. The current paper presents a new model of toxic leadership that emerged from the study. Toxic leadership is a phenomenon sanctioned by the organization, perpetuated by the toxic leader, and lived by the oppressed follower. The model situates toxic leadership within an open organizational frame with recommendations for organizational leaders to drive toxic leadership out of their organizations, for leaders to recognize their toxic behaviors, and for followers to cope with toxic leaders.

Keywords: toxic leadership model, destructive leadership, toxic leaders, oppressed followers

INTRODUCTION

> *Everyone has a model in their head of how they think the world works, and that model is built mostly from what [they've] experienced and what people [they] trust have told [them]. But since everyone has different experiences and trust a different set of people, the models of how we think things work vary wildly from person to person. (Housel, 2020)*

Over a decade, Walker collected stories from students (followers) who were asked to describe working with toxic leaders. Walker and Watkins (2020) analyzed the experiences of 130 followers. Those followers provided chilling stories of suffering experienced at the whim of toxic leaders. Rarely did they recall positive outcomes from that organizational trauma. Instead, they were often trapped in untenable situations until they left the company, were fired, or the toxic leaders moved up and out of the organization. The stories raised questions about what power employees have to counter toxic leaders, how and why their organizations allowed toxic situations to fester, and whether peers intervened or benefited. These questions align roughly with the five features of destructive leadership derived in Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser's (2007) literature review of destructive leaders:

1. Destructive leadership is seldom absolutely or entirely destructive: there are both good and bad results in most leadership situations.
2. The process of destructive leadership involves dominance, coercion, and manipulation rather than influence, persuasion, and commitment.
3. The process of destructive leadership has a selfish orientation; it is focused more on the leader's needs than the needs of the larger social group.

4. The effects of destructive leadership are outcomes that compromise the quality of life for constituents and detract from the organization's main purposes.
5. Destructive organizational outcomes are not exclusively the result of destructive leaders, but are also products of susceptible followers and conducive environments. (Padilla et al., 2007, p. 179)

Whereby Padilla and his collaborators viewed susceptible followers as conformers and contributors, Walker and Watkins (2020) observed that organizational systems and leader-follower power differentials positioned followers as victims rather than accomplices. The feeling of victimization is consistent with Webster, Brough, and Daly's (2016) findings that follower coping strategies provide psychological relief from abusive supervision and destructive leadership behaviors.

Toxic leadership comes at a hefty price for organizations. Previous research demonstrated that toxic leadership leads to higher turnover, recruiting costs, retraining costs, inefficiency, diminished productivity, stunted growth, and more litigation (Bakkal, Serener, & Myrvang, 2019; Baloyi, 2020; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020; Webster et al., 2016). The current paper presents two models developed from the findings of Walker and Watkins (2020). The models depict how toxic leaders and their oppressed followers engage in a downward cycle of behaviors that followers cannot escape. The authors also present recommendations for organizations and followers to help break the vicious cycle of toxic leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Toxic leadership has damaging effects on organizations and employees. According to Friedman and Gerstein (2017), toxic leadership has influenced organizational cultures in negative ways. Toxic leadership is self-centered, egotistical, value-less, and concerned with profits over people (Friedman & Gerstein, 2017). Toxic leaders, and the toxic cultures they create, can produce high turnover, low job satisfaction, low commitment, low productivity, high stress and anxiety, and higher levels of depression (Bakkal et al., 2019; Baloyi, 2020; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020; Webster et al., 2016). For example, Parmer and Dillard (2019) found 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).

Similarly, other authors such as Wegge, Shemla, and Haslam (2014), Rasool, Naseer, Syed, and Ahmad (2018), and Han, Harms, and Bai (2017), argued that there are direct relationships between various leadership styles and their effects on overall employee health, wellness, creativity, and productivity. Their findings suggested that the impact of toxic 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 (Han et al., 2017; Rasool et al., 2018; Wegge et al., 2014). Psychologists have also found that negative emotions are contagious and have an overwhelmingly adverse influence on moods throughout the organization (Daft, 2015).

Types of Toxic Leaders

Aberrant Behavior

According to Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, and Akehurst (2016), narcissistic leaders can carry many attractive leadership qualities and traits. Ong et al. suggest that the emergent leadership traits common in narcissists help toxic individuals promote into leadership positions in the first place. However, qualities and traits initially viewed as positive can begin to decrease as the narcissistic individual spends more time around the followers. Once the group becomes more acquainted with the leader's narcissistic, toxic style, the followers become more disengaged while productivity plummets.

Similarly, Raskin and Terry (1988) found that narcissistic individuals can convey positive leadership traits, such as confidence and extraversion. However, these positive leadership traits do not translate into positive leader performance over the long term (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Narcissistic leaders have high confidence levels and are mostly extroverted, which are two indicators of successful leadership. However, they also demonstrate negative traits such as high lust for power, manipulation, sensitivity to

criticism, poor listening and communication skills, and a lack of empathy (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985; Maccoby, 2000).

Abuse of Power

For Baloyi (2020), toxic leadership consists of the abuse and degradation of employees. This type of toxic leadership includes leaders who abuse authority positions by consistently degrading employees, ridiculing employees in public, forcing employees to undergo physical and psychological pains, and promoting divisiveness between colleagues (Baloyi, 2020). These leaders create environments of low morale, stress, anxiety, depression, distrust, fear, high turnover, everyone for themselves culture, low growth, low motivation, and increase in litigation on their firms. Kendrick (2017) affirmed these findings in her research on toxic leaders, arguing that employees who "experience low morale exhibit numerous negative emotional, physical, and cognitive symptoms; they begin to disengage from their work; and they actively distance themselves from the library's and the larger campus' social and professional spheres" (p. 876).

Egocentrism

Wegge et al. (2014), Rasool et al. (2018), and Han et al. (2017), concluded in their research that egocentric leadership styles impact overall employee health, wellness, creativity, and productivity. Matos, O'Neil, and Lei (2018) also found that egocentric leaders who demonstrated greed, selfishness, and hypocrisy resulted in negative views of the organization and negative feelings of wellbeing and self-worth. Their findings suggested that the influence of an egocentric style of leadership, and the corrupt environment that this kind of leadership creates, has damaging effects on the employee's performance and creativity (Han et al., 2017; Rasool et al., 2018; Wegge et al., 2014). Psychologists have also found that negative emotions are contagious and have an overwhelmingly adverse effect on moods (Daft, 2015).

Emotional Dysregulation

According to Gabriel (2016), toxic leaders lack emotional intelligence. Their inability to demonstrate empathy or regulate their emotions results in workplace environments riddled with fear and high turnover. Friedman and Gerstein (2017) echoed this conclusion, stating that millennials are especially allergic to emotionless leadership. Similarly, Mamaari and Majdalani (2017) contended organizations that "attempt to build on the improvement of the EI of their employees and leaders will first decrease their organizational turnover and decrease the costs of recruitment, training, and adaptation of the new human assets" (p. 345).

Ineffective

In a study conducted by Paltu and Brouwers (2020), leadership that consisted of micromanaging, blaming, and setting unrealistic goals led to organizational toxicity. These toxic behaviors found by Paltu and Brouwers resulted in toxic organizational cultures where employees were less committed to the organization leading to high turnover rates and low levels of job satisfaction and productivity. Dobbs (2014) and Schmidt (2014) found in a similar study that leaders that are seen as ineffective, blaming others, unpredictable, and unreliable also have deleterious effects on the overall organization and its outcomes. Dobbs (2014) and Schmidt's (2014) findings were nearly identical to the findings of Paltu and Brouwers (2020), in that these toxic traits of a leader led to toxic organizational cultures with high turnover, low morale, and low creativity.

Moral Corruption

Cote (2018) contended that darker leadership styles were the result of moral-less and unethical leadership. For Cote, unethical leader behaviors included lying, bullying, corruption, and using fear and coercion to influence followers. These leader behaviors resulted in organizational climates that hindered creativity and productivity and lowered morale. Simalarly, Rasool et al. (2018) and Han et al. (2017) demonstrated that unethical leader behavior had detrimental effects on organizational environments and cultures. Toxic leaders created toxic cultures resulting in employee mental health issues. Employees that

reported experiencing unethical leaders described the loss of creativity, sleep deprivation, and emotional exhaustion.

Followers

All of these various traits touched on above can create a leader that is toxic, valueless, and selfish (de Vries, 2018), which can lead to adverse organizational outcomes. These negative organizational outcomes include lower morale, lower 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 adverse effects, such as anger and resentment, mistrust, reduced confidence, stalled career development, and physical and mental health problems (Kendrick, 2017, p. 852).

Additionally, research completed by Dobbs and Do (2019) applied a toxic leadership framework from an organizational and leadership perspective to assess the correlation between toxic leadership and organizational cynicism. Dobbs and Do's (2019) conclusions revealed a positive relationship between toxic leadership and organizational contempt. For example, employees who reported having leaders with toxic qualities were 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 concluded that employees are quick to counter supervisors' toxicity through inefficient work- behavior (e.g., shifting anger to peers or other identifiable assets of the organization).

Parmer and Dillard (2019) examined the relationship between follower perceptions of how leaders treated them and their expert power in the workplace. Follower's perceptions of their immediate supervisor created "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).

METHOD AND RESULTS

Walker and Watkins (2020) examined the toxic leadership phenomenon through the lens of 130 followers. They performed automatic and manual thematic analysis on follower experiences using NVivo 12 software. Table 1 reports themes generated through automatic coding. The researchers manually coded themes and subthemes related to toxic leader behaviors (Table 2), organizational outcomes (Table 3), organizational climate (Table 4), and follower coping strategies (Table 5).

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

TABLE 2
MANUALLY CODED THEMES AROUND TOXIC BEHAVIOR

Theme	Subthemes
Aberrant	narcissism
	paranoia
Abuse of Power	abuse of positional authority
	degrading
Egocentrism	claiming other's ideas
	favoritism
	greed
	hypocrisy
	selfishness
	suspicion
	transference
Emotional Dysregulation	lacking emotional intelligence
	lacking emotional regulation
	lacking empathy
	lashing out
	punishing
Ineffective Leader Behaviors	blaming
	ignoring feedback
	infighting
	jumping to conclusions
	lacking military bearing
	micromanaging
	overreacting
	setting unclear expectations
	setting unrealistic targets
Moral Corruption	discrimination
	instilling fear
	systemic oppression
	threatening
	unethical

TABLE 3
MANUALLY CODED THEMES OF ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES

Theme	Subthemes
Organizational Outcomes	attrition
	inefficiency
	division of followers
	snowball effect
	toxic leader fired
	strengthened follower bonds
	making mistakes
	lack of unit discipline
	lack of respect

TABLE 4
MANUALLY CODED THEMES AROUND ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Theme	Subthemes
Feelings	apathy
	fear
	inadequacy
	stress
	frustration
	hopelessness
	humiliation
	miserableness
	resentment
Collective Behaviors	selective accountability
	emotional contagion
	avoidance
	internal struggle
	ganging up
Attitudes	low morale
	low trust
	low motivation

TABLE 5
MANUALLY CODED THEMES OF FOLLOWER COPING STRATEGIES

Theme	Subthemes
Coping Strategy	spoke to the toxic leader
	stepped up performance levels
	did not recognize the toxic situation until later reflection
	took the situation in stride
	survived because of commitment to the organization

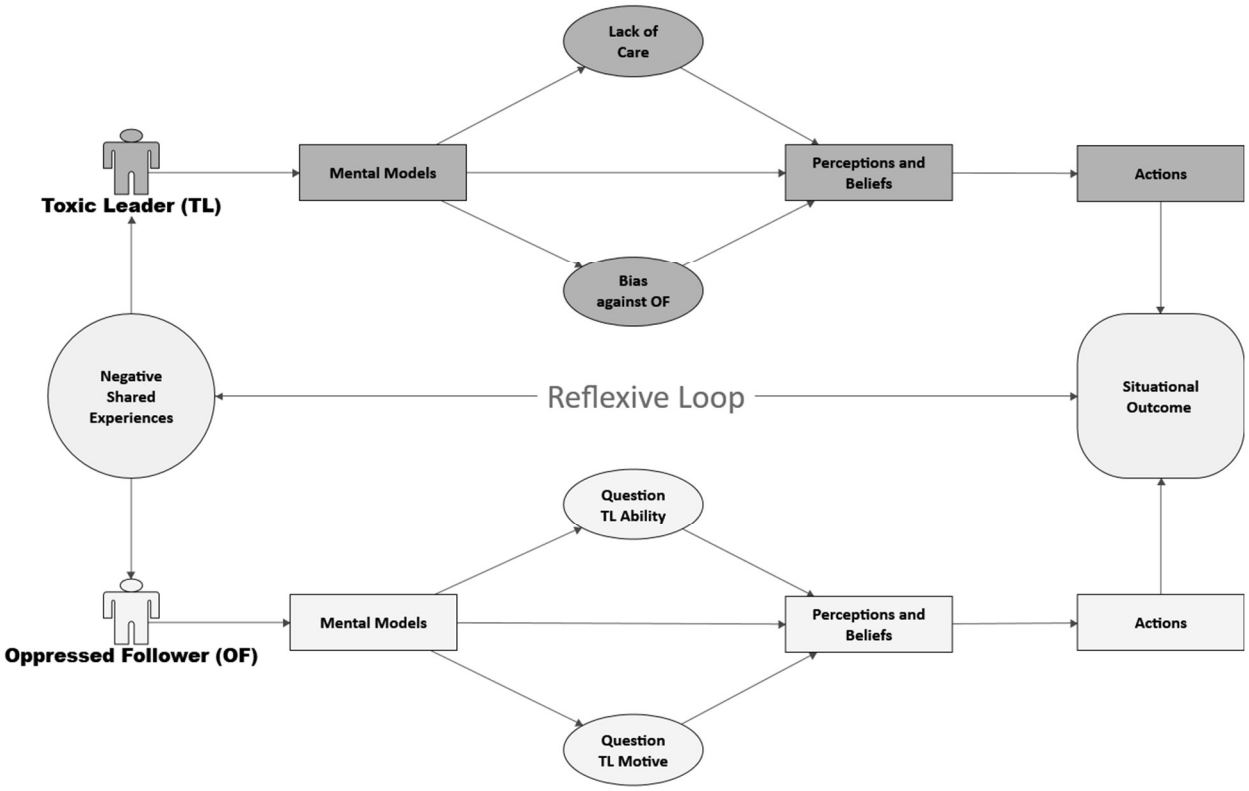
DISCUSSION

Walker and Watkins (2020) categorized six types and 30 subtypes of behaviors based on the follower perceptions of toxic leaders (Table 2). They recorded nine organizational outcomes (Table 3). They also observed 17 subthemes within three organizational climate themes (Table 4). Finally, they categorized five coping strategies (Table 4).

The Closed System Model of Toxic Leadership (Figure 1) models the relationship between the toxic leader and the oppressed follower. Toxic leaders and their oppressed followers eventually engage in a vicious cycle in which each negative experience adds to the overall toxicity. The negative shared experiences reinforce negative mental models, further confirmed by negative spins on situational outcomes. Shared experiences take on a negative connotation within their mental models such that they cannot process new situations outside of a negative frame. For example, oppressed followers question the toxic leader's motives (e.g., she is out to get me, he is only in this for the money) or abilities (e.g., he is incompetent, she does not understand how things work). The toxic leaders' behaviors suggest they do not care about oppressed followers or do not trust their abilities to perform. The toxic leaders direct or indirect behavior then supports a continued cycle of slights, innuendo, undermining, under-resourcing, micromanaging, and

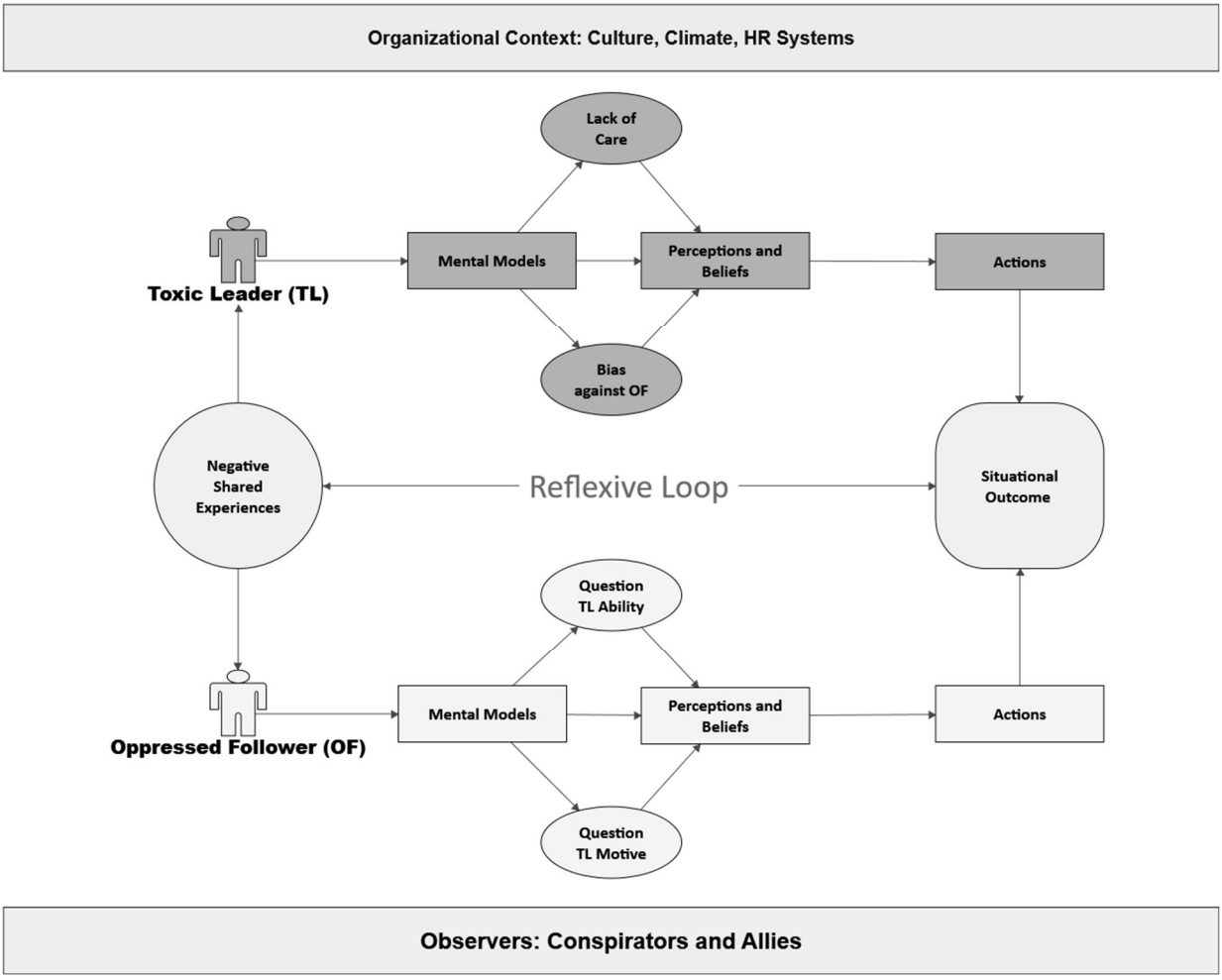
complaints that work against the followers' abilities to perform. As each party acts based on their perceptions and beliefs, a vicious cycle is born in which adverse outcomes feed into new situations and shared experiences through a reflexive loop.

FIGURE 1
CLOSED SYSTEM MODEL OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP



The toxic leader model depicted in Figure 1 is a closed system between the toxic leader and the oppressed follower(s). That model can be expanded into an open system when considering organizational enablement of toxic leadership and the detrimental effects on oppressed followers (see Figure 2). The managers of toxic leaders may not have sufficient downward visibility into their organizations to understand that subordinates are toxic leaders. They might also have scorecards for their leaders that do not take human elements into account. As long as managers produce acceptable financial and operational outcomes, leaders might ignore other problems such as high turnover, negative 360-degree performance reviews, or personnel complaints. There might also be unclear signals from the subordinates of toxic leaders. To be clear, some followers of toxic leaders are not oppressed. Some followers receive beneficial effects from toxic leaders, while their colleagues suffer the toxic effects. For example, in a patriarchal organization, male subordinates of a toxic leader might benefit from the leader's toxic behaviors against their female peers.

FIGURE 2
OPEN SYSTEM MODEL OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP



Ideally, an employee could sit down with the leader and air any grievances. In that perfect world, both parties listen carefully, present their evidence, learn from each other, and resolve the situation to mutual benefit. In reality, oppressed followers might have few options when working for toxic leaders. By definition, the toxic leader will have positional power and authority over the oppressed follower. Thus, the toxic leader will most likely have greater access to other organizational leaders and resources to suppress the follower further.

Institutional barriers, tenure, peer pressure, ignorance, and other factors may prevent oppressed followers from successfully navigating toxic situations. Human resource departments work to keep the organization from harm. Thus, HR representatives might side with the toxic leader over the oppressed follower, especially if the manager has already branded the employee as ineffective. HR might also be eager to prevent a toxic situation from turning into an opportunity for litigation. Thus, there might be an effort to "circle the wagons" to prevent the oppressed follower from gaining traction that could cast the organization in a negative light.

Executives might have many reasons to support their toxic leaders. They might doubt or be oblivious to organizational concerns. They might also believe toxic leaders' rhetoric, especially charismatic leaders who assure them that all is well. They might have friendships or affinities for toxic leaders that cloud their judgment or ability to assess the situation with impartiality. They might also fear that the toxic leader would sue the organization if fired.

The oppressed follower colleagues might also have reasons for dissuading action by an oppressed follower. The colleagues might disagree with the oppressed follower's assessment of the situation. The colleague might have reasons to prefer the status quo, such as maintaining privileged status. Some colleagues might not want to rock the boat for fear of being swept overboard themselves. Peers may also believe that oppressed colleagues are overplaying their concerns. They might commit the fundamental attribution error believing that oppressed colleagues are targeted fairly, rather than victims of toxic behaviors.

Followers might have many reasons for being unable or unwilling to fight back against toxic leaders. Followers might not have experienced constructive leadership. Some followers might be too inexperienced to understand whether leaders' behaviors are acceptable or out-of-bounds. Followers might not have the tenure or reach to have established positive relationships with influential leaders or peers. Thus, they might rightly feel marooned, believing that others are unlikely to believe or support their grievances. Some followers might also be unaware of the organizational systems and processes designed to protect their interests. Followers also might have cultural or personal reasons for keeping quiet.

Implications

Based on the reasons above, oppressed followers might feel that the cards are stacked against them. Indeed, Walker's sample of followers (Walker & Watkins, 2020) rarely reported beneficial coping strategies. They were more likely to ride out the situation than to act in their self-interest.

Followers

- Document the situation in detail with contemporaneous notes, dates, and facts. Keep the notes outside of organizational information systems and consider having a few copies.
- Develop political acumen within the organization. Understand how the company creates value, acceptable behaviors, political centers of power, and where is the toxic leader connected.
- Build coalitions to change the balance of power. For example, work on cross-departmental committees to build relationships with other leaders and peers. Build a strong reputation and a broad network of people who can attest to work ethic and output.
- Act professionally and maintain a strong work ethic. Do not fall into the trap of acting out against the organization through work slowdowns, tantrums, and gossip.
- Attempt to keep open lines of communication with the toxic leader by openly addressing concerns, if possible.
- Exercise caution when approaching human resources, understanding that they work for the organization and not for the employee. Always do so professionally and with a solid case. Seek outside legal counsel if necessary.
- Develop self-care routines to counter stress, burnout, and other harmful effects of the toxic situation.

Organization

Organizations need to be on the lookout for toxic leaders and toxic environments. The organization cannot assume that employees will report toxic leadership because of fear of reprisal. Therefore, the organization may need to create anonymous listening posts, feedback mechanisms, and exit briefings to receive candid feedback. The organization must also act fairly on feedback to build trust. HR representatives need to be trained to recognize toxic leadership, understand the effects, and provide counsel to employees affected by toxic leaders.

Colleagues must also consider stepping out of the shadows and reporting toxic leadership. It may take moral and intellectual courage to report bad behavior, especially in the face of possible repercussions. Therefore, organizations must make it safe for employees to call out toxic behaviors. Colleagues might also consider acting together to seek safety in numbers. Depending on the type of toxic leader, the oppressed follower and colleagues might consider intervening together with the toxic leader. For example, the

oppressed follower and allies might approach a paternalistic leader to point out biased behavior against women.

Some toxic leaders are morally corrupt. Others may be unaware of their biases against employees or how their poor leadership affects subordinates. Those who are unaware or ineffective might change their behavior if the organization intervened or if the oppressed follower challenged the toxic leader effectively. Leaders can use the indicators listed in Table 6 as potential symptoms of a toxic environment. If some of these indicators are present, leaders should investigate further.

TABLE 6
POTENTIAL SIGNS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP

Followers	Organizational Climate	Organizational Outcomes
Low commitment	Bad moods	High turnover
High stress	Everyone for themselves	Inefficiency
Low job satisfaction	Intentional social distancing	Low productivity
Anxiety	Divisiveness	Low growth
Depression	Low morale	High costs of recruitment
Disengagement	Distrust	High costs of retraining
Fear	Fear	Litigation
Stalled career development		
Physical health issues		
Mental health issues		
Loss of creativity		
Sleep deprivation		
Emotional exhaustion		
Cynicism		
Contempt		

Future Research

The Open System Model of Toxic Leadership was developed based on Walker and Watkins' study (2020) and toxic leadership literature. There is an opportunity to study how toxic leaders view themselves, what subordinate interventions they might deem helpful, and if they have been called out as toxic leaders by their subordinates. It would also be instructive to understand how organizational and human resource leaders view their role in propping up toxic leaders, supporting oppressed followers, and creating supportive environments. Furthermore, what are effective organizational and personal interventions to combat different toxic leadership styles?

CONCLUSION

The authors created an open systems model of toxic leadership using the lived experiences of 130 followers of toxic leaders. Toxic leaders exhibit a range of negative behaviors that create psychological stress on their followers. Organizational culture, climate, and systems often enable and support toxic leaders, to the detriment of followers' wellbeing and organizational effectiveness. Bystanders sometimes witness toxic behavior without intervention or support for the oppressed followers. The open systems model of toxic leadership reveals that followers must exercise courage, disregard organizational power differentials, and find ways to flip the toxic script.

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