Is Constructive Discharge a Metaphor for a "Boy Named Sue"?
The Remedial Role of Psychological Safety When Leadership Is Toxic

Renika Atkins
Prairie View A&M University

JoAnn Emale
Prairie View A&M University

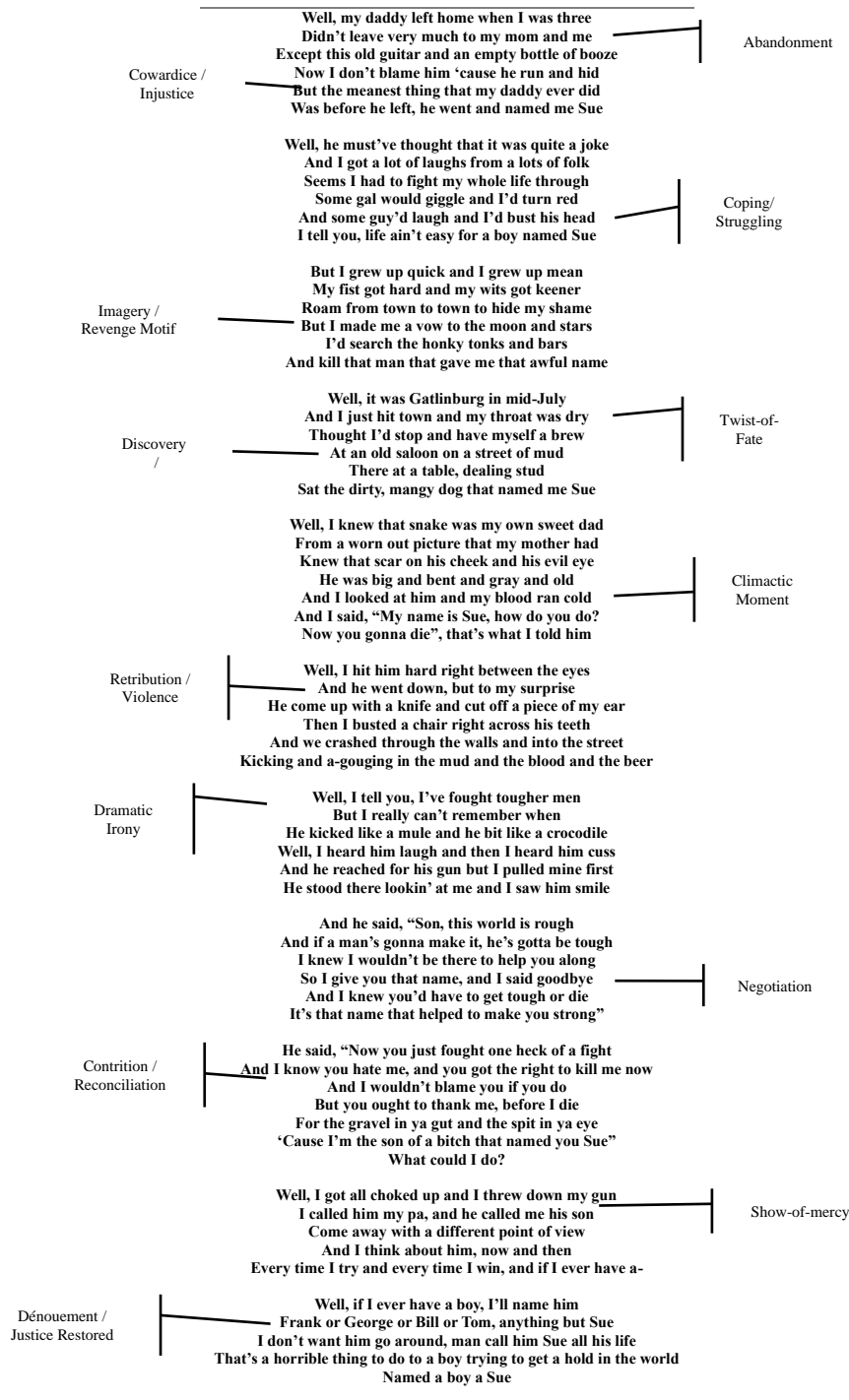**Reginald L. Bell**
Prairie View A&M University

This paper uses the metaphor of "A Boy Named Sue" to explore resilience and conflict resolution within the workplace, focusing on how toxic leaders sabotage employees. It delves into the practice of constructive discharge, where leaders, instead of directly addressing performance issues, create hostile environments, pushing employees to resign. We examine how leaders gatekeep and undermine employees' inputs to induce resignations without explicit dismissal. The literature shows that toxic leaders sabotage environments, create ethical dilemmas, power imbalances, and organizational dysfunction. Our review of the literature provides methods to mitigate destructive leadership practices, helping managers use psychological safety measures to foster more inclusive and supportive workplace environments. We present six recommended corrective actions managers can take to reduce the harm caused by toxic leaders.

Keywords: constructive discharge, dysfunction, ethics, justice, leadership, sabotage, toxic, turnover

INTRODUCTION

What makes for great drama is the story has an easily identified beginning, middle and end. There is a mystery involved. The plot is captivating. The events are not predictable. Justice is restored where justice is denied. The ending is satisfying to the audience. The critical elements of drama allow for the excitement of being a voyeur discretely watching—and anticipating—as the main characters interact to settle their conflicts. "Fiction informs reality, but reality instructs fiction" (Oquendo & Bell, p. 22, 2024). All great dramas possess figures of speech; examples are: twist-of-fate, irony, betrayal, discovery, vengeance, reconciliation, forgiveness and mercy. Because figures of speech raise ordinary language from the mundane to elevated imagery, we often see poignant examples in classic drama. As it unfolds, scene-by-scene, act-by-act; until the climactic moment and eventually the resolution (the dénouement or untying of the actions) the audience remains spellbound. Notice in Figure 1, the entirety of the lyrics to "A Boy Named Sue" (Silverstein, 1969), there is Shakespearian in magnitude drama that unfolds in this epic tell about a father-and-son, near-fatal reunion.

FIGURE 1
"A BOY NAMED SUE"

Cowardice / Injustice

Well, my daddy left home when I was three
Didn't leave very much to my mom and me
Except this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze
Now I don't blame him 'cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that my daddy ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me Sue

Abandonment

Well, he must've thought that it was quite a joke
And I got a lot of laughs from a lots of folk
Seems I had to fight my whole life through
Some gal would giggle and I'd turn red
And some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head
I tell you, life ain't easy for a boy named Sue

Coping/ Struggling

Imagery / Revenge Motif

But I grew up quick and I grew up mean
My fist got hard and my wits got keener
Roam from town to town to hide my shame
But I made me a vow to the moon and stars
I'd search the honky tonks and bars
And kill that man that gave me that awful name

Discovery /

Well, it was Gatlinburg in mid-July
And I just hit town and my throat was dry
Thought I'd stop and have myself a brew
At an old saloon on a street of mud
There at a table, dealing stud
Sat the dirty, mangy dog that named me Sue

Twist-of-Fate

Well, I knew that snake was my own sweet dad
From a worn out picture that my mother had
Knew that scar on his cheek and his evil eye
He was big and bent and gray and old
And I looked at him and my blood ran cold
And I said, "My name is Sue, how do you do?
Now you gonna die", that's what I told him

Climactic Moment

Retribution / Violence

Well, I hit him hard right between the eyes
And he went down, but to my surprise
He come up with a knife and cut off a piece of my ear
Then I busted a chair right across his teeth
And we crashed through the walls and into the street
Kicking and a-gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer

Dramatic Irony

Well, I tell you, I've fought tougher men
But I really can't remember when
He kicked like a mule and he bit like a crocodile
Well, I heard him laugh and then I heard him cuss
And he reached for his gun but I pulled mine first
He stood there lookin' at me and I saw him smile

And he said, "Son, this world is rough
And if a man's gonna make it, he's gotta be tough
I knew I wouldn't be there to help you along
So I give you that name, and I said goodbye
And I knew you'd have to get tough or die
It's that name that helped to make you strong"

Negotiation

Contrition / Reconciliation

He said, "Now you just fought one heck of a fight
And I know you hate me, and you got the right to kill me now
And I wouldn't blame you if you do
But you ought to thank me, before I die
For the gravel in ya gut and the spit in ya eye
'Cause I'm the son of a bitch that named you Sue"
What could I do?

Well, I got all choked up and I threw down my gun
I called him my pa, and he called me his son
Come away with a different point of view
And I think about him, now and then
Every time I try and every time I win, and if I ever have a-

Show-of-mercy

Dénouement / Justice Restored

Well, if I ever have a boy, I'll name him
Frank or George or Bill or Tom, anything but Sue
I don't want him go around, man call him Sue all his life
That's a horrible thing to do to a boy trying to get a hold in the world
Named a boy a Sue

When toxic leaders are caught being toxic, they often pretend they are being that way for the benefit of the organization. "I knew you'd have to get tough or die," is an iconic line from the song that Johnny Cash's

made famous, "A Boy Named Sue," (Silverstein, 1969) which resonates with employees who find themselves in toxic work environments, where resilience becomes essential to endure challenging conditions. Like Sue, forced into hardship by his father, employees under toxic leadership often face hostile workplaces, incivility, wokeness, tyrannical managerialism, unlawful vaccine mandates, that compel them to adapt, struggle, or leave (Bell, 2022; Bell & Kennebrew, 2023; Joyce & Bell, 2010). Toxic leadership is pervasive in corporate environments, often resulting in constructive discharge. These tactics are designed to force the employee's hand, making resignation seem like the only viable option.

Legally, constructive discharge is treated similarly to wrongful termination, as resignation is not truly voluntary; instead, it's a direct response to the unworkable conditions created by the employer. Consistent with the U. S. Department of Labor's (DOL) definition of Constructive Discharge (Gotter & Ramirez, 2024) wrote:

> *Constructive discharge—also called constructive dismissal—occurs when an employee resigns due to pressure from the workplace or a hostile work environment. Though the employee voluntarily resigned, the pressures of an intolerable workplace ultimately drove them to quit* (para).

In these environments, leaders use manipulation, power imbalances, and tactics like gatekeeping and exclusion to foster a climate of fear and control. Toxic leadership often places employees in a situation where, as the Boy Named Sue argued, "Seems I had to fight my whole life through." This sentiment reflects employees' internal and external battles when faced with a toxic workplace. The "mean streets" can symbolize the hostile and manipulative tactics toxic leaders employ, forcing individuals to either adapt to these conditions or leave. Much like the character in the song who develops resilience through adversity, employees in such environments often struggle to maintain their mental health and professional identity under oppressive circumstances.

Toxic leaders often create environments that drive employees to leave voluntarily, a practice known as constructive discharge. This leadership style is characterized by undermining, micromanagement, and gatekeeping, which create hostile work conditions, often affecting customers and the bottom line (Bell, 2022). Research indicates that employees experiencing these behaviors are more likely to resign due to stress and burnout (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Einarsen, Skogstad, & Aasland, 2010). These leaders use exclusionary tactics to limit the participation of skilled employees, fostering feelings of inadequacy and insecurity (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006). In many cases, toxic leaders employ the No True Scotsman fallacy to challenge the authenticity or qualifications of their employees, further alienating them (Reed, 2004; Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011).

Toxic leaders often stifle innovation by sabotaging employees, limiting cognitive diversity within the organization. Research suggests that leaders who engage in these behaviors prevent diverse ideas from surfacing, leading to dissatisfaction and eventual turnover (Page, 2007; Robinson et al., 2019). In this context, sabotage refers to intentional actions taken by leaders to undermine or discredit their employees' work. These leaders may target high-performing individuals, using power dynamics to manipulate outcomes and drive employees to resign. Constructive discharge cases frequently involve leadership behaviors that intentionally create environments where resignation becomes the only viable option (Fahie, 2019; Gardner et al., 2016).

Toxic leadership behaviors disrupt team dynamics and foster distrust within organizations, leading to what is known as constructive discharge, a process where employees feel compelled to resign due to untenable working conditions. These practices, which include bullying, micromanagement, and favoritism, hinder not only individual performance but also the organization's overall success (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015; Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011). Through closely examining destructive leadership styles, psychological safety, and the importance of ethical decision-making frameworks, this literature review explores how toxic leadership can erode organizational culture, impede innovation, and contribute to high turnover. Toxic leadership manifests in various destructive behaviors that often disguise themselves as authoritative or directive. Jowers (2015) describes toxic leaders as self-centered and

manipulative, using tactics such as exclusion and favoritism to control team dynamics. Leaders exhibiting narcissistic tendencies may prioritize their self-interest, disregarding employee contributions and undermining morale (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020). This behavior aligns with Grijalva et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis, which finds that narcissism in leaders correlates with destructive practices that ultimately harm organizational culture.

The No True Scotsman fallacy serves as a means for toxic leaders to question employees' legitimacy or expertise, deepening feelings of inadequacy and alienation. Once an employee is determined a target, there is no counter argument satisfactory enough to convince a toxic leader they deserve to stay. All counterexamples given by that employee are denied, or invalidated. Employees may feel forced to either adapt to these hostile conditions or leave, which carries personal and professional costs. This paper examines the impact of these behaviors on employee turnover, organizational culture, and innovation. Specifically, it explores how toxic leaders employ manipulation and exclusionary tactics, the role of psychological safety (or lack thereof) in resignations, and how workplace sabotage affects organizational performance and legal risks. This study addresses one question:

RQ: What remedial role does psychological safety play in reducing employees' propensity to resign under toxic leadership and constructive discharge?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on toxic leadership and its consequences provides a nuanced understanding of how destructive leadership behaviors ripple through organizations, affecting employees, culture, and performance. Toxic leaders often use manipulation, intimidation, and exclusion to maintain power, creating environments where employees feel undervalued and forced to either adapt or leave. These dynamics are not only damaging to employee well-being but also result in constructive discharge, organizational dysfunction, and diminished innovation. This review explores these themes through the lens of toxic leadership, psychological safety, and ethical frameworks, offering insights into both the mechanisms of harm and potential solutions.

The Central Issues

Toxic leadership contributes significantly to constructive discharge by leveraging manipulation, exclusion, and questioning employee competence to create intolerable working conditions. As Johnny Cash describes *"Some gal would giggle and I'd get red, and some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head."* This line captures the intense frustration and reactive emotions that toxic environments can provoke in individuals, mirroring the feelings of alienation and helplessness many employees experience under toxic leadership. The absence of psychological safety amplifies these detrimental effects, fostering disengagement, burnout, and resignation. Such environments stifle creativity, limit cognitive diversity, and weaken organizational culture and performance. While a strong authoritative style might yield short-term gains, research consistently shows that the long-term impact of toxic leadership is far more damaging, creating a costly cycle of turnover and dysfunction. Addressing these behaviors through enforceable policies, leadership reform, and supportive systems is critical for fostering healthier workplaces. Proactive measures can help organizations retain talent, encourage innovation, and reduce turnover, ultimately building a culture that supports employees and drives success.

Toxic leadership creates a ripple effect within organizations, fostering environments where employees feel undervalued, isolated, and demoralized. Leaders who undermine team members, question their competencies, and disregard their contributions instill a sense of insecurity and self-doubt in employees. High levels of stress, burnout, and an ongoing sense of psychological danger characterize such environments. As employees navigate these conditions, they often confront a challenging decision: adapt to the toxicity, attempt to resist it, or leave entirely. The cost of staying in such a climate can be high, impacting mental health, job satisfaction, and ultimately, the organization's culture and performance.

Transactional leadership, with its focus on structured processes, performance metrics, and compliance, is a leadership style that may align with constructive discharge. By emphasizing defined objectives and organizational alignment, transactional leaders may use constructive discharge as a strategy to address underperformance or misalignment. While transactional leadership is not inherently toxic, its focus on measurable outcomes can create scenarios where constructive discharge becomes a tool to uphold organizational standards (Bass, 1990). Though risks of misuse exist, constructive discharge can be an effective way to maintain a productive and aligned workforce while minimizing conflict when applied fairly and strategically.

Employees under toxic leadership often adopt resilience as a survival mechanism, finding ways to endure adversity and maintain performance. While resilience can provide temporary relief, the ongoing stress of adapting to hostile conditions has long-term consequences. Employees may detach emotionally, lower their expectations, or limit interactions with problematic leaders to cope. However, as research shows, resilience alone does not eliminate the systemic issues created by toxic leaders. For many, the only sustainable solution is leaving the organization altogether, as staying may risk continued damage to their well-being and career progression. This section explores these coping strategies and their toll on individuals, highlighting the importance of fostering supportive environments rather than forcing employees to simply "tough it out."

Table 1 shows the impact of toxic leadership on organizational outcomes, which summarizes how toxic leadership undermines key organizational metrics. It decreases employee morale (Burns, 2017; Gardner et al., 2016), increases turnover (Grijalva et al., 2015; Tepper et al., 2017), and reduces productivity by fostering a demoralizing environment (Hoch et al., 2018; Kellerman, 2004). Innovation and creativity are stifled, as employees are less willing to share ideas or take risks (Edmondson, 1999; Page, 2007). Additionally, toxic leadership erodes psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Kusy & Holloway, 2009) and limits the diversity of thought by discouraging varied perspectives essential for innovation (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011). The table connects these behaviors to their harmful organizational outcomes, reinforcing the paper's arguments with scholarly evidence.

**TABLE 1**
IMPACT OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP ON ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES

Outcome	Effect of Toxic Leadership	Supporting Evidence
Employee Morale	Decrease in overall morale	Burns (2017); Gardner et al. (2016)
Employee Turnover	Increase in turnover rates	Grijalva et al. (2015); Tepper et al. (2017)
Productivity	Decrease in employee productivity	Hoch et al. (2018); Kellerman (2004)
Innovation and Creativity	Reduced willingness to share ideas and innovate	Edmondson (1999); Page (2007); Robinson et al. (2019)
Psychological Safety	Erosion of safe space for open communication	Edmondson & Lei (2014); Kusy & Holloway (2009)
Diversity of Thought	Limited due to lack of encouragement for diverse perspectives	Harms, Spain, & Hannah (2011); Page (2007)

Organizational Outcome Factors

Psychological safety plays a critical role in employee retention. It refers to the belief that employees can express their ideas and make mistakes without fear of retribution. In toxic work environments, this safety is absent, leading to disengagement and eventual resignation (Edmondson, 1999). As Johnny Cash recounts "*I fought my way through a crowded life*". This lyric illustrates employees' struggle navigating workplaces where psychological safety is lacking. The absence of a supportive and secure atmosphere forces employees to endure constant challenges, mirroring the protagonist's fight for survival and respect. Employees in such environments often fear punishment for minor mistakes, which diminishes their willingness to take risks or share innovative ideas (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). This lack of support and validation exacerbates the effects of toxic leadership, contributing to high turnover rates (Harris & Jones, 2018). Both neurotypical and neurodivergent employees face similar challenges, struggling to maintain their roles in the absence of psychological safety.

Figure 2 illustrates the contrasting impacts of ethical leadership versus toxic leadership on key organizational outcome factors, using an impact scale from 1 to 10. It demonstrates that ethical leadership significantly enhances employee morale, productivity, psychological safety, innovation and creativity, as indicated by the tall blue bars. In contrast, toxic leadership severely diminishes these outcomes, with low red bars representing its detrimental effects. The turnover rate under toxic leadership is notably high, as shown by the towering red bar, whereas ethical leadership is associated with significantly lower turnover. This comparison aligns with the themes of the research paper by visually emphasizing how toxic behaviors such as micromanagement, exclusion, and the No True Scotsman fallacy erode organizational health and employee well-being. Conversely, ethical leadership fosters trust, inclusivity, and collaboration, creating an environment where employees and organizations can thrive. This reinforces the argument for addressing toxic leadership and prioritizing strategies that promote ethical practices and psychological safety.

FIGURE 2
CONTRASTING IMPACTS OF ETHICAL VS TOXIC LEADERSHIP ON KEY ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOME FACTORS
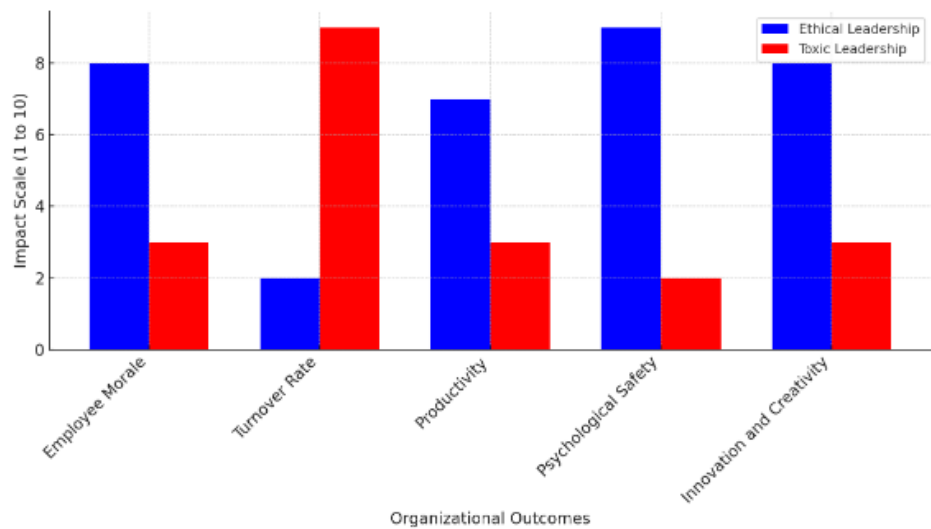
The evidence overwhelmingly shows that toxic leadership has costly repercussions within organizations, including high turnover and diminished productivity. Addressing these issues requires developing and enforcing policies that promote respect, inclusivity, and fairness across all levels. Lipman-Blumen (2005) emphasizes that strong organizational policies serve as a buffer against toxic leaders, establishing clear expectations for acceptable behavior and consequences for violations. Such policies discourage manipulative behaviors, like gatekeeping and exclusion, that undermine team cohesion and

employee morale, leaving employees feeling devalued and trapped. Harms, Spain, and Hannah (2011) argue that accountability-focused policies ensure leaders who use tactics like the No True Scotsman fallacy—questioning employees' expertise or alienating them—are held responsible. Transparent, merit-based evaluations protect employees from being unfairly targeted and prevent the conditions that contribute to constructive discharge. When leaders are held accountable for fostering inclusion and collaboration, it diminishes the power dynamics that allow toxic behaviors to flourish and push employees toward resignation.

Table 2 summarizes the central issues linking toxic leadership behaviors—like micromanagement, exclusion, and the No True Scotsman fallacy—to their effects on employees and organizations. It highlights outcomes such as low morale, burnout, and disengagement alongside broader impacts like high turnover, stifled innovation, and legal risks. The table contrasts these destructive practices with ethical leadership, which fosters trust, empowerment, and stronger organizational cultures through fair policies and open communication. This visual emphasizes addressing toxic behaviors to enhance organizational health and performance.

TABLE 2
CENTRAL ISSUES CONCERNING TOXIC WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENTS

Concept	Description	Examples of Behaviors	Effects on Employees	Organizational Impacts
Toxic Leadership	Leadership style characterized by manipulation, control, and creating hostile work conditions.	Micromanagement, favoritism, exclusion, undermining competence	Low morale, stress, burnout	High turnover, decreased performance
Constructive Discharge	Conditions where employees feel forced to resign due to intolerable work environment.	Intentional lack of support, unrealistic demands, gatekeeping	Employee disengagement, resignation	Potential for legal repercussions, talent loss
No True Scotsman Fallacy	Tactic used by toxic leaders to question the qualifications or contributions of competent employees.	Dismissing accomplishments, creating arbitrary standards	Feelings of inadequacy, loss of confidence	Stifled innovation, reduced diversity of thought
Psychological Safety	The belief that one can express ideas without fear of retribution, essential for engagement and retention.	Lack of feedback channels, punitive responses to mistakes	Anxiety, risk-aversion, reduced creativity	Decreased collaboration, lower levels of innovation
Workplace Sabotage	Actions by toxic leaders to intentionally undermine or discredit employees.	Blocking promotions, restricting resources, spreading misinformation	Frustration, emotional exhaustion	Weakened culture, organizational dysfunction
Ethical Leadership	An alternative leadership approach that emphasizes respect, transparency, and inclusivity.	Fair evaluations, open communication, supportive policies	Increased trust, employee empowerment	Enhanced morale, improved retention, stronger culture

Reducing Toxic Leadership

Johnny Cash's line, "I knew you'd have to get tough or die," captures the challenging reality faced by employees who work under toxic leadership. Toxic leadership, a pervasive issue in organizations, involves behaviors that create a hostile and manipulative environment, often leading employees to develop resilience as a coping mechanism or to eventually seek escape through resignation (Burns, 2017; Einarsen, Skogstad, & Aasland, 2010). Toxic leaders often exploit power imbalances, using psychological tactics like gaslighting and manipulation to undermine employees' confidence and sense of safety, fostering an environment of constant tension (Fraher, 2016; Gardner et al., 2016). In these scenarios, employees are forced to adapt by "getting tough" or risk suffering under an oppressive leadership style that is detrimental to their mental health and productivity.

De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) examine the effects of despotic leadership, noting that leaders who lack social responsibility often cultivate a negative climate that promotes cynicism and disengagement among employees. Similarly, Kets de Vries and Balazs (2011) argue that toxic leaders project their insecurities onto employees, fostering an atmosphere where individuals feel unsupported and undervalued. Kellerman (2004) further expands on this by suggesting that toxic leaders often deflect accountability, making it difficult for employees to trust in their leadership or align with the organization's goals.

Edmondson (1999) introduced the concept of psychological safety, emphasizing the need for environments where employees feel safe to express ideas and make mistakes without fear of ridicule or retribution. Toxic leaders, however, often erode psychological safety by fostering an environment of intimidation and punitive responses, which limits open communication and creativity (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Kusy and Holloway (2009) found that environments lacking psychological safety lead to increased burnout and turnover, as employees cannot perform optimally when they fear negative repercussions for honest mistakes or feedback.

Gardner et al. (2016) identify workplace bullying as a significant factor contributing to the decline in psychological safety, with toxic leaders creating hostile conditions that drive employees to avoid risks and innovation. This fear-based management approach stifles diversity of thought, leading to stagnation and disengagement across teams. The diminished sense of safety impacts both neurotypical and neurodivergent employees, who struggle to perform in settings where their contributions are neither valued nor protected (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018).

Reducing Constructive Discharge

Constructive discharge is used by toxic leaders, like questioning employees' expertise or restricting their advancement, as forms of workplace sabotage with serious ethical and legal implications for organizations. Constructive discharge occurs when an employee feels compelled to resign due to intolerable working conditions intentionally created or allowed by their employer. Rather than outright firing an employee, toxic leaders or organizations may employ tactics that create a hostile or unbearable work environment, such as persistent micromanagement, exclusion, manipulation, and undermining of competence. Often viewed negatively, it sometimes be perceived as a useful tool for organizations when managed ethically and transparently. It can facilitate organizational change by encouraging the departure of employees who are resistant to new directions or misaligned with corporate values, allowing space for individuals who better support the company's goals (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Additionally, constructive discharge can preserve team cohesion by addressing employees whose behaviors disrupt collaboration or undermine productivity (Harrell-Cook, 2008). When handled fairly, such as offering severance packages or career transition support, constructive discharge may help organizations avoid prolonged conflicts that could damage workplace morale or public image (Tepper, 2000).

Implementing an ethical decision-making framework within organizations can mitigate the effects of toxic leadership. Ethical leaders prioritize integrity, respect, and transparency, fostering environments that counteract the destructive tendencies of toxic leadership (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011). "I made a vow to the moon and stars, that I'd search the honky-tonks and bars;" this lyric captures the resolve and determination required to address toxicity within organizations. Just as the song's protagonist commits to overcoming adversity, ethical leaders must be steadfast in their commitment to fostering fairness and

accountability. Kalshoven and Den Hartog (2011) explore how ethical leadership behaviors align with personality traits that promote inclusivity and fairness, suggesting that leaders with strong ethical foundations are less likely to engage in manipulation or favoritism. Hoch et al. (2018) found that ethical, authentic, and servant leadership styles positively influence employee satisfaction and morale. Leaders who adhere to ethical principles model respect and accountability, setting a standard for behavior that discourages the development of toxic dynamics. De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) further emphasize that ethical decision-making can strengthen team cohesion and trust, creating a culture that values employee well-being and deters the rise of toxic leadership.

When organizations prioritize ethical decision-making, they provide safeguards that protect employees from toxic leadership practices. Tepper, Simon, and Park (2017) examine how ethical guidelines reduce the likelihood of abusive supervision by setting boundaries on acceptable behavior. Organizations that implement clear policies around ethical behavior make it challenging for toxic leaders to exploit their power unchecked, which can prevent the manipulation and mistreatment that drive constructive discharge (Tepper, 2000).

PROMOTING HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Regular training in ethical leadership offers a proactive approach to preventing toxic behaviors before they take root. Kellerman (2004) advocates for such training to educate leaders on prioritizing transparency, accountability, and employee well-being, creating an environment of trust and mutual respect. Ethical training programs also help leaders identify manipulative behaviors, reducing the likelihood of self-serving actions that harm morale. Avey, Palanski, and Walumbwa (2011) highlight that continuous ethical training strengthens leaders' commitment to inclusivity and discourages exclusionary tactics, favoritism, and gatekeeping. By instilling values that counteract toxic tendencies, ethical leadership training provides a framework that ensures leaders are less likely to undermine employee competence or contributions, thus mitigating conditions that lead to resignation under duress.

Psychological safety is another critical component of addressing toxic leadership, as it enables employees to express ideas and take risks without fear of retaliation. Edmondson (1999) describes psychological safety as foundational to engagement, collaboration, and innovation. Toxic leadership erodes this safety by fostering a culture of intimidation, where employees fear retribution for mistakes or dissenting opinions, leading to increased turnover and burnout. Edmondson and Lei (2014) argue that promoting psychological safety ensures employees feel supported and valued, while Kusy and Holloway (2009) emphasize that organizations with strong psychological safety experience lower burnout rates and higher retention. When employees feel empowered to contribute without fear of sabotage or dismissal, they are more likely to share creative ideas, driving innovation and resilience. Psychological safety is essential for maintaining cognitive diversity and fostering organizational problem-solving, countering the stifling effects of toxic leadership.

Kellerman (2004) argues that ethical decision-making frameworks can act as a "check" on leaders, ensuring that their actions align with organizational values rather than personal agendas. By establishing transparent and enforceable policies, organizations can hold leaders accountable for creating supportive and respectful environments, which reduces the risk of toxic leadership and fosters employee loyalty. Page (2007) argues that cognitive diversity—differences in thought processes and perspectives—is essential for organizational innovation and problem-solving. Toxic leaders, however, often undermine this diversity by stifling alternative viewpoints and limiting contributions that do not align with their own (Robinson et al., 2019). This behavior discourages creativity and prevents the organization from fully benefiting from its employees' varied skills and experiences.

Harms et al. (2011) discuss how toxic leaders create barriers to cognitive diversity through workplace sabotage, targeting high-performing individuals and isolating team members with unique perspectives. These actions demoralize employees and limit the organization's capacity for innovation, as diverse ideas are essential to developing novel solutions and maintaining a competitive edge. Like the "Boy Named Sue," who developed resilience in response to hardship, employees facing toxic leadership often adapt by building

emotional resilience. Tepper et al. (2017) note that while resilience can enable employees to endure adversity, it is not a sustainable solution for coping with persistent toxic behavior. Detert and Burris (2007) argue that resilience may delay employee turnover but ultimately leads to burnout, as employees struggle to thrive in an environment devoid of support and psychological safety.

The literature demonstrates that toxic leadership is a multifaceted issue with far-reaching consequences for employees and organizations. From undermining psychological safety to limiting cognitive diversity, toxic leaders create environments that stifle innovation and drive talented employees to leave. While resilience may help employees temporarily endure such conditions, it is not a sustainable solution. Instead, fostering ethical leadership and prioritizing psychological safety are critical steps in mitigating the harmful effects of toxic behaviors. These findings provide a roadmap for organizations to address the root causes of toxicity and create healthier, more inclusive workplaces.

Research Question Answered

Addressing toxic leadership is crucial to building resilient and innovative organizations. Organizations can cultivate environments where employees feel valued, engaged, and supported by prioritizing ethical leadership, enforceable policies, and psychological safety. While some may argue that strict authority is necessary to maintain control, the evidence highlights the lasting benefits of a respectful, inclusive culture over one dominated by fear and manipulation. Not only does prioritizing these values enhance organizational performance, but it also fosters mutual respect and long-term success. Embracing these changes promotes healthy leadership and ensures that the negative effects of toxic practices are mitigated, benefiting all stakeholders in the organization.

RQ: What remedial role does psychological safety play in reducing employees' propensity to resign under toxic leadership and constructive discharge?

RQ Answer: Psychological safety allows employees to voice concerns, share innovative ideas, and take calculated risks without fear of retribution. Regular feedback sessions, open communication channels, and a strong emphasis on employee well-being are necessary components of this approach. A psychologically safe workplace enhances collaboration and creativity and ensures employees feel valued and supported, further discouraging the conditions that enable toxic leadership to thrive. By prioritizing these strategies, organizations can build healthier work environments that promote trust, inclusion, and sustained organizational success. In addition to training and policies, fostering psychological safety is vital for improving retention and employee engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDED CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

This analysis underscores the profound negative impact of toxic leadership on organizational health and employee well-being. Toxic leaders often employ tactics like exclusion, favoritism, and gatekeeping, which erode morale and drive capable employees toward resignation. While some may argue that these tactics can maintain control or filter out weaker employees, the evidence suggests that they primarily serve to create distrust, damage morale, and weaken the organization. In contrast, ethical leadership and psychological safety provide effective antidotes by fostering inclusivity, transparency, and mutual respect. Implementing ethical decision-making frameworks can mitigate the harmful effects of toxic leaders, fostering a culture where employees feel valued, engaged, and empowered. "I knew I wouldn't be there to help you along, so I gave you that name and I said goodbye." Because leaders often inadvertently misconstrue their engagement in the illegality of constructive discharge benefiting the organization, we have written three recommendations to help them avoid the pitfalls of "A Boy Named Sue."

Leadership and culture are critical factors contributing to constructive discharge, where leaders leverage manipulation, exclusion, and questioning employee competence to create intolerable conditions that employees feel forced to resign. This absence of psychological safety amplifies the detrimental effects of toxic behaviors, fostering disengagement, burnout, and eventual resignation among capable employees.

Such an environment limits cognitive diversity, stifling creativity and innovation, which in turn weakens organizational culture and reduces overall performance. While some may argue that a strong authoritative style can drive results and enforce discipline, research consistently shows that the long-term impact of toxic leadership outweighs any short-term gains. It creates a costly cycle of turnover and organizational dysfunction. Addressing these toxic behaviors through leadership reform, enforceable policies, and supportive systems is essential for fostering healthier work environments. By taking proactive steps to prevent destructive practices, organizations can retain talent, encourage innovation, and reduce turnover, ultimately building a culture that supports both employees and organizational success. We present six corrective actions that will effectively address toxic leadership and foster a supportive work environment; therefore, organizations should take these proactive measures.

The Six Recommended Corrective Actions

1. *Equip leaders* with comprehensive ethical leadership training is essential. This training should emphasize ethical decision-making, transparency, and inclusive practices, helping leaders align their decisions with both organizational goals and employee well-being.

2. *Establish standards for respectful and ethical behavior*; such training empowers leaders to prevent manipulative actions and create a workplace culture rooted in mutual trust and engagement. Leaders trained in ethical practices are better equipped to prioritize employee satisfaction while steering the organization toward long-term success.

3. *Develop clear, enforceable policies on workplace conduct*. These policies must define acceptable behavior, outline consequences for toxic practices, and emphasize accountability at all levels.

4. *Codify expectations* for fair and respectful leadership to protect employees from exclusionary or manipulative behaviors, providing them with clear recourse when such actions occur. Policies that hold leaders accountable for fostering an inclusive workplace create a more equitable environment, reducing the power dynamics that enable toxic behaviors to persist.

5. *Adopt a proactive framework* that includes fostering open communication, ensuring accountability, and promoting employee well-being to address psychological safety and prevent disengagement. Disengagement often manifests as decreased motivation, absenteeism, and withdrawal, signaling a lack of psychological safety. Leaders can counter this by creating trust-filled environments where employees feel valued, supported, and empowered to share concerns without fear of retribution.

6. *Invite regular feedback sessions*, one-on-one meetings, and recognition of contributions are critical tools to address disengagement early and prevent toxic dynamics from escalating. By prioritizing these strategies, organizations can create a culture that mitigates the risks of psychological safety breaches and reduce resignation under toxic environments.

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