

Mitigating Toxic Leaders Through the Experiences of Employees: A Qualitative Narrative Inquiry

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The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry explored the toxic leadership through the experiences and perceptions of employees to identify strategies and best practices for mitigation increase productivity, enhance job satisfaction, increase morale and retention in an organization in the Northeast region of the United States. Using purposive and snowball sampling, 15 employees participated in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed five themes and two subthemes, highlighting toxic behaviors, lack of empathy, bullying, discrimination, poor communication, and impact on mental health. The study addresses a research gap by examining toxic leadership effects between employees and organizations, emphasizing the importance of addressing toxic leadership to foster a healthier work environment and enhance morale and job satisfaction.

Keywords: toxic leadership, narrative inquiry, leadership mitigation strategies, organizational leadership, employee well-being

INTRODUCTION

Toxic leadership corrodes the morale of personnel and the effectiveness of an organization (Dobbs & Do, 2019). The detrimental effects of toxic leadership inevitably increased employee turnover, decreased organizational commitment, and contributed to various mental and physical stressors in individuals (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Bakkal et al., 2019). The effects of toxic leadership cause systemic harm, fragmenting the organization from leaders in positions of power who tend to display negative and destructive leadership (Herbst & Mukhola, 2018). Negative leadership behaviors and traits become imbedded within the organization, occasionally placing undue pressures altering the state of organizations over time (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).

Williams (2019) suggested toxic behaviors including shaming, passive hostility, team sabotage, and a lack of regard or compassion, can elicit adverse reactions within organizations and individuals. Williams (2019) posited the behaviors of toxic leadership create a foundation for a significant drain on organizations' financial, physical, and mental health. Examining toxic leader behaviors in literature within the United States found similar overlapping contributions. Within the United States, toxic leadership studies garnered increased interest in leadership, organizational and management studies (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).

Defining toxic leadership proved to be a complex task in literature as several definitions developed over time. Whicker (1996) defined toxic leaders as maladjusted and even malicious, which scholars used as a foundation to expand the comprehension of the toxic leadership phenomenon. Morris (2019) defined toxic leadership as a leadership style characterized by harassment, belittlement, and instilling fear among subordinates ultimately leading to increased stress, diminished performance, and the emergence of other undesirable behaviors. Hinen (2020) posited toxic leadership is defined as poisons, potentially sickening, or even killing the organization when allowed to exist. Both definitions were used as working definitions for this study. Morris (2019) and Hinen's (2020) working definitions of toxic leadership encompassed the interrelationships between the organization and the employees/followers, which support the complexity of toxic leadership influences. Toxic leaders contributed negatively to organizations throughout many industries, specifically in the United States (Boddy, 2014; Hudgins et al., 2022; Williams, 2019).

Problem Statement

Employees subjected to toxic leadership experiences result in a decrease in morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention (Laguda, 2020). Toxic leadership within organizations has extensive implications for employees, organizational outcomes, and the intention to remain within the organization (Milosevic, 2020). The toxic elements and organizational stress in the work environment create a climate of despair and hopelessness, leading to decreased productivity, absenteeism, diminished performance, reduced job satisfaction, decreased loyalty, and employee attrition (Akca, 2017; Burns, 2017; Fahie, 2019). The hidden cost associated with toxic behavior include expenses of \$190 billion in healthcare costs and 120,000 annual deaths (Allen, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative narrative inquiry study was to develop a deeper understanding of the toxic leadership phenomenon through the experiences and perceptions of employees to learn strategies and best practices to mitigate toxic leadership, increase productivity, enhance job satisfaction, and increase morale and retention in an organization in the Northeast region of the United States. The study intended to contribute to leadership literature to assist organizations in recognizing toxic leaders' traits and behaviors that could potentially have negative impacts on the organization and individuals. The research aims to empower leaders charged with mitigating risks to develop strategies and interventions to reduce toxic leaders.

Population and Sample

The population encompassed 86,747 members within a public LinkedIn group from various organizations between 2015-2023. Purposive sampling narrowed the population of recruited research participants using individuals who matched the detailed criteria of current or former employees of an organization. To ensure enough participants, the researcher used the snowball method of participant recruitment. The detailed criterion used to recruit potential participants was as follows: identify as an employee who worked under toxic leaders within an organization in the Northeast region of the United States; worked for the organization for a minimum of one year between the years of 2015 and 2023; be 21 years of age or older. The criterion aimed to cultivate a sample of approximately 12 participants (or until saturation is complete) who currently or previously worked under toxic leaders between the years of 2015-2023 an organization. The participants contributed to the study through semi-structured one-on-one interviews using an online computerized electronic platform like Zoom and Teams.

Significance of the Study

Toxic leadership practices lead to many negative emotional symptoms, disengagement from the organization, low morale and have a detrimental impact on employee performance (Behery et al., 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2020). Williams (2018) suggested toxic leadership hurts individuals, groups, and organizational performance, with further comprehension of the ramifications of toxic leadership when ignored and tolerated within the U.S. Department of Defense and Federal government. Uncovering the experiences and perceptions of employees gives a voice to employees working for toxic leaders and

promotes awareness of the influences of toxic leadership in organizations. Organizations where employees are exposed to toxic leaders erode the organization (Satiani & Satiani, 2022).

Leaders and organizations should develop and implement specific methods to identify, control and eliminate toxic leadership to minimize the prevalence and negative influences of such leadership in organizations (Singh et al., 2018). Leaders may benefit by using this knowledge to identify toxic leadership within the organization and cultivate mitigating strategies to decrease or eliminate toxic leadership occurrences within the organization. The study results may provide knowledge to equip leaders charged with managing individuals with a resource when handling employees experiencing toxic leadership.

Research Questions

In narrative inquiry research, research questions are critical to conduct and shape a vigorous qualitative research study (Kim, 2016). The research questions supported the purpose of the study and guided the exploration of the stories of real-life experiences and perceptions of individuals while professionally operating within the organization. The two research questions were developed to support the three concepts of a narrative inquiry design. Research question one supported temporality and sociality and research question two supported spatiality.

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of toxic leaders described from the experiences and perceptions of employees while employed by a local agency?

Research Question 2: What strategies and best practices are required to successfully mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership to enhance morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention?

Conceptual Framework

Organizational control theory examines the process by which one party attempts to influence the behavior of another within a given system (Gossett, 2012). Quantitative literature measures toxic leadership correlating negative contributors impacting individuals and the organization (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Paltu & Brouwer, 2020). Understanding the complexity of leadership is difficult for organizations when developing a high-performance culture (Anjum et al., 2018). Organizational leaders faced with difficulties like dysfunctional and toxic leadership may experience negative organizational outcomes such as deficient performance, low morale, and high turnover (Walker & Watkins, 2020). The effects of toxic leadership can create a fearful atmosphere, leave followers demoralized and impact on the sustainability of the firm (Tavanti, 2021).

Organizational Control Theory

Organizational control theory is an inherently communicative activity that consists of verbal and physical actions designed to overcome resistance and exercise authority over others (Gossett, 2012). Control leadership is about maintaining control and authority which involves clear communication, being assertive, and focusing on accountability. Leaders must provide direction and guidance to their team, and stick to consistent standards and protocols (Bizmanualz, 2022). Verburg et al. (2018) suggested employees envision leaders as management agents who influence organizational control through behaviors and developing alliances with subordinates to adhere with organizational norms.

Full-Range Leadership Model

The full-range leadership model illuminates the spectrum of leadership engagement and effectiveness exhibited within organizations. Avolio (2011) posited the three distinct leadership styles: laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational, forming a continuum of leadership behaviors. The theoretical construct presents a nuanced lens to examine the multifaceted dynamics of leadership (Sivaraj, et al., 2021). According to the 2022 Workplace Belonging Survey, 46% of employees considered leaving organizations due to involvement with ineffective leaders and one in five Americans are uncomfortable engaging with leaders due to lack of trust and fear (SHRM, 2019). Leadership outcomes draw close relation to employees'

job satisfaction, motivation, performance, well-being, commitment, and turnover from the subordinate perspective and exert extra force in organizational outcomes of turnover, culture, and performance (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018).

This study adapted the full-range leadership and organizational control theories to provide a useful perception to explore and understand the toxic leadership phenomenon and the influences on morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention. The domains of the framework served as useful to refine, organize the study and served as an outline to discuss the findings of this study. The framework included elements associated with individual and environmental contributors that are potential catalysts of toxic leadership. Understanding the full-range leadership theory led to the understanding of differing influences that harm organizations. Tavanti (2019) suggested to identify toxic leaders in organizations requires an approach that applies leadership dynamics to the multidimensional context influencing and sustaining toxic leadership.

Definition of Terms

The definitions of terms encompassed below details the terms that have integral meanings within this study.

Narrative Inquiry is a qualitative design that focuses on three concepts during the story telling, temporality the time of the experiences and how the experiences could influence the future; sociality cultural and personal influences of the experiences; and spatiality the environmental surroundings during the experiences and their influence on the experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Toxic Leaders: leaders who engage in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibit certain destructive personal characteristics with continuous harm to followers and organizations (Lipman-Blumen, 2006).

Toxic Leadership: toxic leadership is defined as poisons, potentially sickening, or even killing the organization where it exists (Hinen, 2020). A “form of leadership that harasses, belittles, and frightens employed persons, mainly followers, which causes undue stress or pressure leading to decreased performance and other undesired behaviors” (Morris, 2019, p.13).

Toxic Workplace: the workplace is toxic when an individual or individuals in power are narcissistic, using tactics of bullying, harassment, threats, and negative means to humiliate people. The toxic workplace causes mental and physical health problems, absenteeism, job burnout, counterproductive work behavior and concluding in corrupting productivity of the organization (Chu, 2014; Pickering et al., 2017).

Summary

Toxic leadership is a common challenge for organizations and individuals. Current research expounded upon toxic leadership’s negative influences and prevalence in organizations (SHRM, 2019). The research aimed to provide a robust, vivid narrative detailing the stories of the participants’ experiences and perceptions working in organizations while encountering toxic leadership. The qualitative method and narrative inquiry design intended to collect, uncover, and understand the real stories expressed as employees’ experiences and perceptions and how the experiences influenced morale and retention within the organization.

Literature Review

The literature review aims to develop a deeper understanding of the toxic leadership phenomenon through the experiences and perceptions of employees working for toxic leaders in organizations in an urban city in the Northeast region of the United States. The literature review examines a compendium of scholarly, peer-reviewed archival, and contemporary works that are dedicated to the study of toxic leadership and the far-reaching repercussions on facets such as job satisfaction, productivity, morale, and retention.

Historical Content

The concept of toxic leadership has gained significant prominence and recognition among scholars and practitioners (Anjum et al., 2018; Burns, 2017). The term toxic leadership is a leadership style characterized

by destructive behaviors and detrimental personal attributes (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). Reed (2004) postulated that leaders in military organizations, who exhibit negative or destructive behaviors for self-promotion often steer organizations towards peril, emphasizing the profound impact of leadership styles on organizational outcomes.

Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is associated with undermining shared goals and exploiting authority for personal gain and ego rather than the objectives and visions of organizations (Padilla et al., 2007; Whicker, 1996). Saqib & Arif (2017) characterized toxic leadership behaviors as narcissism, self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, and authoritarian leadership, postulating negative behaviors trickled down and negatively affected the voices of employees.

Toxic Leaders

Toxic leaders operate along a diverse spectrum, from unintentional harm stemming from a lack of awareness to the deliberate and malevolent infliction of damage (Williams, 2005). Dysfunctional leaders simply lacked skills and awareness of deficiencies in leadership, while toxic leaders found satisfaction and glory in destroying others, thriving on the imposed harm (Tavanti, 2005). Lubit (2004) identified the destructive nature of toxic leadership, arguing that the trait of toxic managers was destructive narcissism. Three characteristics described toxic leaders: the pretender, the micromanager, and the egomaniac (Box, 2012).

Morale

Morale embodies the collective behavioral expression of employees' emotional connection to an organization (Bhasin, 2018; Sanford & Conrad, 1944). Burns (2017) emphasized that toxic leadership transgresses established cultural norms by employing deliberate separation tactics and engaging in abusive behaviors, consequently diminishing employee motivation and morale. Mistry et al. (2015) found that favorable morale is germinated from constructive experiences conversely, Britt et al. (2013) postulated a direct linkage between combat exposure and stress-inducing circumstances and the emergence of symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that exerted a detrimental influence on unit morale.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is directly correlated with employee productivity and job performance (Aziri, 2011; Culibrk et al., 2018). Raziq & Maula-Bakhsh (2015) posited unclear directives, policies, and decision-making processes compromised work situations resulting in employee alienation from the organization. Schmidt (2014) discerned that toxic leadership engendered adverse repercussions on organizational cohesion by encouraging self-promotion and misconduct introducing control and unpredictability impacting group-level job satisfaction. Harper et al. (2015) posited that employees who received constructive support from leaders in decision-making and organizational contributions typically exhibited higher job satisfaction.

Retention

Das and Baruah (2013) defined retention as the process wherein employees are encouraged to remain within the organization for an extended period. Walia and Bajaj (2012) asserted that developing and implementing various retention strategies enhance employee satisfaction, consequently leading to greater commitment to the organization. Covella et al. (2017) suggested that leaders who provide support, encouragement, and career mentorship heighten employee engagement, reinforcing employees' willingness to remain with the organization. The retention of employees who make positive contributions to the organization and are challenging to replace becomes costly. It threatens the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, underscoring the critical concern of retention (Ogidan & Lao, 2015).

Productivity

Williams (2018) reported a high prevalence of all toxic behaviors due to lack of self-awareness, negative interpersonal style, suspicion of others, passive hostility, defensiveness, refusal to allow dissent and shaming and blaming impacting organizational targets, and witness resulting in decreased contribution, motivation, and productivity from subordinates. Cocker et al. (2013) investigated leaders, finding reports of high psychological distress and absenteeism, associated with productivity loss. Conversely, study results determined increased autonomy of frontline employees through quality enhanced and increased organizational productivity (Marinova et al., 2008).

Current Content

The contemporary landscape of organizational research and scholarly works is marked by a deep commitment to understanding the dynamics underpinning employee well-being and performance, including morale, retention, productivity, and job satisfaction. In the era of evolving work environments, where remote work arrangements, changing leadership paradigms, and shifting organizational cultures are the norms, an up-to-date exploration is imperative (Alexander et al., 2021). Through exploration, the aim is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the toxic leadership phenomenon and the interplay with the modern era.

Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership harms employees' job satisfaction, diminishing work quality, and plunging organizations into disarray (Baloyi, 2020). Uysal (2019) proposed that elevated job stress, induced in 36 percent of employees by toxic leadership, detrimentally affects stress-related organizational behaviors. The counterproductive behaviors exhibited by toxic leadership, including retaliation and abuse of power, lead to an increased intention to leave, reduced task performance, and permeate the organization (Hattab et al., 2022). Organizations lacking personal and professional development strategies, transparency, and accountability exacerbate toxic leadership, creating fertile ground for its proliferation, with detrimental consequences for the entire organization (Hughes, 2022).

Toxic Leaders

Hudgins et al. (2022) surveyed employees, elucidating the negative consequences from toxic leader behaviors such as ineffective communication, dishonesty, a lack of professional boundaries, disregard for competing priorities, unfair or rude treatment, disrespect, micromanagement, lack of transparency. Bringhurst and Palombi (2023) proposed that toxic leaders exert detrimental effects on the performance, morale, and safety of aircrew, leading to fatal crashes resulting from abusive behavior. Mohammad and Siddiqi (2023) investigated the impact of toxic supervision, revealing that working under such supervision lead to decreased social support and increased individual distress.

Morale

Mallik et al. (2019) established a correlation between morale as the driving force behind peak organizational performance. Labrague (2021) conducted a study in the healthcare sector, indicating a substantial decrease in morale due to toxic leadership. Toxic leadership and the adverse effects on morale ripple through organizations, fostering an atmosphere of disillusionment and disengagement (Leonova et al., 2021). Training and empowering employees contributes to stable organizational relations, reducing employee agitation, and fostering positive alignment with the organization (Obeng et al., 2021). Policies inducing employees' insecurities and psychological strain regarding future employment positions should be reconsidered to potentially reduce turnover rates stemming from low morale (Obeng et al., 2020).

Retention

Organizations have invested significant efforts in recent years to prioritize social initiatives and gain insights into talent retention (Singh, 2019). Within this context, Rombaut and Guerry (2020) have proposed that certain characteristics, including recognition, personalized learning, flexibility, and compensation,

wield substantial influence as retention strategies for both younger and older employees. To effectively address employee turnover and retention, organizations must proactively implement strategic measures to fill employee vacancies and develop robust employee retention strategies that deter employees from seeking opportunities elsewhere (Goldstein et al., 2020). Mitigating the adverse effects of employee turnover necessitates the integration of strategic business objectives, human resources practices, and an organizational culture that fosters and promotes ongoing collaborative behaviors among employees (Nayak et al., 2021).

Job Satisfaction

Singh et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive study exploring the relationship between leadership styles and job satisfaction, underscoring the pivotal role of transformational leadership in enhancing job satisfaction. Alexander et al. (2021) examined the influence of remote work arrangements on job satisfaction in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic revealing that while remote work provided greater flexibility, challenges are presented relating to isolation and blurred work-life boundaries. Montuori et al. (2022) investigated the impact of organizational culture on job satisfaction. Employees who perceive a strong alignment between personal values and the prevailing organizational culture are more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction.

Conceptual Framework Literature

Organizational control theory and the full-range leadership model were used to support and serve to refine, organize, and outline the study. The frameworks included elements associated with individual and environmental contributors that are potential catalysts for toxic leadership. Toxic leadership studies describe toxic leadership as a multidimensional construct with a vast range of associated negative behaviors and negative organizational outcomes (Lipman-Blumen, 2010; Pelletier, 2010; Rasool et al., 2018). Poisonous effects are associated with leaders displaying destructive behaviors and dysfunctional qualities that harm organizational performance and employee mental and physical health (Erickson et al., 2015; Syahruddin et al., 2022; Williams, 2018). Organizational control theory examined the process by which one party attempts to influence the behavior of another within a given system (Gossett, 2012).

Organizational Control Theory

Organizational control theory is an inherently communicative activity that consists of verbal and physical actions designed to overcome resistance and exercise authority over others (Gossett, 2012). Verburg et al. (2018) posited that organizational control relates to organizational trust, impacting employee performance. Pianese et al. (2023) identified potential risks with control mechanisms, highlighting the organizational control influences on employees' beliefs and behaviors. Weibel et al. (2016) elucidated how subordinates identify organizational controls as factors impacting the organization's trustworthiness.

Full-Range Leadership Model

Bass and Avolio conducted an extensive examination of leadership, culminating in the development of the full-range leadership model (Serrat, 2021). The model posited that leaders employ a spectrum of behaviors to influence subordinates (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). The full-range leadership model categorizes these behaviors into three primary categories: motivation, stimulation, and influencing (associated with transformational leadership); management-by-exception and contingent reward (associated with transactional leadership); and avoidance of responsibility for leadership (corresponding to passive/avoidant or laissez-faire leadership (Avolio, 2011). Transformational leadership represents a leadership style that effectively harnesses the ideals and motivations of followers to align with the organization's goals (Wilson, 2018). Transactional leadership represents a leadership approach relying on strategies to motivate through rewards, including monetary incentives, in exchange for subordinate efforts (Ofei et al., 2022). In contrast, laissez-faire leadership epitomizes leadership characterized by abdication of responsibilities and marked by disengagement from subordinates, irrespective of organizational or performance objectives (Alloubani et al. 2019).

Summary

Leaders face a challenging and evolving landscape in which the concept of toxic leadership continues to persist despite increased awareness of the detrimental effects (Hattab et al., 2022). In the modern era, toxic leadership remains an issue across various industries, demographics, and geographical locations. Employees have become more aware of the potential consequences of toxic leadership due to the extensive research and media coverage highlighting the impact on individuals and organizations (Mergen et al., 2021). The negative repercussions, including high retention and low morale, have only become more pronounced over time (Kellerman, 2004; Sutton, 2007; Webster, 2011).

Persistence raises critical questions for leaders today and organizations, on methods to address and prevent toxic leadership in organizations including effective mitigating strategies. The findings presented in this study underscore the need for leaders to remain vigilant and proactive in addressing toxic leadership. Recognizing the warning signs, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, and promoting ethical leadership practices are essential steps in combating toxic leadership. Leaders must acknowledge the role of leadership theories in understanding the consequences of toxic leadership on both the individual and organizational levels. Incumbent leaders should engage in ongoing research and dialogue regarding toxic leadership. Leaders should adopt leadership approaches, implement preventive measures, and create healthier work environments that prioritize employees' well-being and the organizations' long-term success.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN APPROPRIATENESS

A qualitative research method and a narrative inquiry design were selected to explore, gather, and understand the participants' perceptions and experiences with toxic leadership. The research method and design afforded employees who have endured toxic leadership experiences, the ability to voice their experiences and perceptions, which otherwise were left unheard of through other research methods and design approaches. A qualitative method is a suitable method because the purpose of the study is to support the research problem identified through gaps in the literature (Edmondson & Zuzul, 2016). Narrative inquiry outlined the framework necessary to focus on eliciting the emotions and meanings attached to the experiences of participants (Kim, 2016). A narrative inquiry research design was selected to enable employees to convey their experiences and perceptions through interviews.

Research Method Appropriateness

A qualitative method is a suitable method because the purpose of the study is to support the research problem identified through gaps in the literature (Edmondson & Zuzul, 2016). Qualitative research demonstrates inherent flexibility and an exploratory nature, facilitating participants in articulating experiences while enabling researchers to listen attentively devoid of preconceived hypotheses (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). The elected method governing this research endeavor allowed the researcher to present participants' narratives through a distinctive lens. Given the phenomenon of toxic leadership and potential consequences on morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention within organizations, using a qualitative method proved fitting to effectively probe into the phenomenon's complexity and explore successful strategies to mitigate toxic leaders. For this study, narrative inquiry was the best design that utilized the maximum knowledge from participants during the interviewing process.

Comparatively, in quantitative research, data are collected through numerical means to explore and construct the meaning of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Reed, 2004). Quantitative and mixed methods isolate the understanding of the phenomenon from numerical data and are not appropriate for this study. The intent of the quantitative research method is to understand the phenomenon by analyzing statistical data (Bauer et al., 2021; Moustakas, 1994). Using a qualitative research method permits the emphasis on the completeness of the experience and perceptions as opposed to the objectives or sole parts of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Design Appropriateness

A narrative inquiry design aims to produce a plausible account of participants' stories, experiences, perceptions, and meanings in context (Rau & Coetzee, 2022). In developing this study, narrative inquiry was chosen to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of employees who have endured toxic leadership while employed within organizations and generate strategies to mitigate toxic leaders in the workplace. The narrative inquiry is a qualitative design that focuses on three concepts during storytelling. Temporality is the time of the experiences and how the experiences could influence the future. Sociality is the cultural and personal influences of the experiences; and spatiality is the environmental surroundings during the experiences, and their influence on the experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Boland and Tankasi (1995) studied organizational narratives, treating each as an artifact of organizational reality to be discovered. Czarniawska (2007) suggested that long-lived narratives are as significant as new narratives, which communicate sentiments about norms and practices that deserve careful attention from the researcher. Narrative stories can be gathered through various means, including interviews, letters, photos (artifacts), journals, field notes, and autobiographies. Collected narratives can be analyzed thematically, structurally, or dialogically in specific places or situations, which is significant when analyzing the data by the researcher (Creswell, 2013).

Case Study Research

Case studies focus on an issue with the case to provide insight into the phenomenon. Case study research intends to answer the why and how questions through the comparative study of one or more social systems over time of a worthwhile phenomenon (Tight, 2017). Unlike other research designs, in case studies, the justification of worthiness varies between researchers despite adequately supporting the argument of the research (Yin, 2013). The validation of worthiness, potential case naming issues, and time challenges associated with case study research do not align with the aim of this research study. Case study research is developed by building upon an in-depth understanding of the case and relying on multiple data sources rather than individual stories as in narrative research, which makes a case study design inappropriate to support the purpose of the study (Yin, 2017).

Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research highlights an entire cultural group through shared interpretations and obtained values to determine how the culture works without illustrating the understanding of the problem (Miller & Salkind, 2002). Ethnography design focuses on the culture to develop or infer decisions about the environment based on participant behaviors (Ploder & Hamann, 2021). Knowledge is obtained from a select group of participants within a larger group to understand both individual and group beliefs (Roberts & Sanders, 2005). The goal of this narrative inquiry research was to explore the individual life stories consisting of experiences and perceptions from each employee who has endured toxic leadership to gain understanding on how their individual experience impacted low morale and their tendency to leave the organization and to explore strategies to mitigate toxic leaders in the workplace.

Research Questions

To generate meaningful narrative data, researchers must ask useful questions that are clear and descriptive, open-ended, and structural, to encourage an emotional connection aimed at promoting thoughtful and meaningful answers from participants (Kim, 2016). The research questions support the purpose of the study and provided guidance with the exploration for the stories of real-life experiences and perceptions of individuals while professionally operating within the organization. The two research questions were developed to support the three concepts of a narrative inquiry design. The first research question supported *temporality*: the time of the experiences and how the experiences could influence the future; *and sociality*: the cultural and personal influences of the experiences. The second research question supported *spatiality*, which is the environmental surroundings during the experiences and their influence on the experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Research question one supported temporality and sociality, and research question two supports spatiality.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

A population may consist of objects or events researchers want to understand, including individuals, social roles, positions such as city health department directors, or social groupings such as families, organizations, classrooms, and cities (Chadwick, 2017). The population comprised 86,747 members within a public LinkedIn group from various organizations. Through purposive sampling, the sample from the population was narrowed using detailed criteria and separated into a group of prospective participants to be involved in the study. A purposive sampling technique allows researchers to systematically identify the composition of the sample prior to data collection (Schreier, 2018). A purposive sampling method was implemented to recruit volunteers.

Using a purposive sampling method, the snowball method was implemented to obtain enough participants that were not reached. Using a detailed criterion, the sample consisted of 15 employees who worked under toxic leaders between 2015-2023 for this study. The detailed criteria used to recruit potential participants were as follows: be an employee who worked under toxic leaders within an organization in the Northeast region of the United States; have worked for the organization for a minimum of one year between the years of 2015 and 2023; be 21 years of age or older.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Flick (2018) identified informed consent as a mutual contract explaining the study's purpose, the participant's expectations, and the confidentiality procedures involving the data and privacy measures taken to protect the participants' identity. For this study, an informed consent form was disseminated to participants via email regarding the study. Confidentiality is integral in safeguarding participants from any type of unpropitious action due to involvement. For this study, the researcher upheld the highest ethical standards and protected the privacy and rights of each participant.

Instrumentation

For this qualitative narrative inquiry study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted to collect participants' responses to the interview questions. Participants were provided with the flexibility to have the interviews conducted virtually or in person. Computerized electronic audio-recording platforms, Microsoft Teams and Zoom were used to conduct participant interviews for the study. Before recruitment of participants, permissions from the LinkedIn recruitment site and Institutional Review Board were obtained to involve participants within the study. To support this study's research questions, 11 interview questions were created to solicit information intended to gain understanding on employees' perceptions and experiences involving toxic leadership in organizations and strategies to mitigate this problem (Appendix 1 is the revised field test interview questions). The information collected aimed to assist in understanding how the experiences and perceptions influenced employees' morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention within the organization. The instrumentation items aligned with each research question are noted in Table 1. Research questions (RQs) are supported by interview questions (IQ). The revised field test interview questions are in Appendix 1.

TABLE 1
INSTRUMENTATION ITEMS ALIGNED TO THE RESEARCH

Research Question:
<i>RQ1: What are the characteristics of toxic leaders described from the experiences and perceptions of employees while employed by a local agency?</i>
<i>RQ1 is supported by IQs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6</i>
<i>RQ2: What strategies and best practices are required to successfully mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership to enhance morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention?</i>
<i>RQ2 is supported by 7, 8, 9, 10, 11</i>

Field Test

In qualitative studies, researchers are vital to test the data collection tools prior to collecting live data (Billups, 2021). A field study was conducted by three subject matter experts (SMEs) who have doctorated degrees, have published in peer-reviewed journals, and have experience with field testing. The SMEs reviewed the problem and purpose statements, the research questions, and the interview questions to ensure there is a strong alignment and to ensure each interview question supports the specific research question. The SMEs reviewed the interview questions to ensure the questions were not leading or redundant. The recommendations included adding four additional questions and revising the verbiage in several of the questions to ensure the right questions were asked to collect the correct data to answer the research questions. The revised field test interview questions are in Appendix 1.

Credibility and Transferability

In qualitative research, the researcher ensures quality and rigor through trustworthiness, which is conveyed throughout the study (Billups, 2021; Flick 2018). Trustworthiness can be achieved by implementing strategies that demonstrate the research findings are dependable, honest, credible, and transferable. Findings should be truthful and fully describe the explored phenomenon (Billups, 2021). Credibility is developed through thick description during data collection and supports the development of trustworthiness within the study. The member checking process will increase the study's credibility and reduce risk and biases potentially reflected in results (Candela, 2019). The goal of thick description permits the researcher to clearly evaluate the degree to which conclusions are transferable to other times, settings, people, and situations (Billups, 2021).

The use of a purposive sampling method for this study assured that participants were employees during the years of 2015-2023 and who experienced toxic leaders in the organization. The snowball sampling method was used to recruit volunteers from the organization to reach saturation. Snowball sampling is a recruitment method in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects. The use of only audio-recorded interviews with the consent of the participants permitted transcriptions of experiences to be exact. Before integrating the transcriptions from the interviews, a full copy was emailed to each participant for review and approval.

Interviews were used as primary data and gathered successful organizational training strategies as secondary data to cross-reference and demonstrate triangulation for this study. Audio-recording platforms Teams and Zoom were used to ensure accurate transcription of interviews with participants. Video cameras were turned off, and video recordings were not allowed. In-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to obtain detailed descriptions of experiences and perceptions from participants for analysis.

The sample from the population of employees in the organization aimed to demonstrate transferability in similarly structured organizations. The study intended to highlight toxic leadership behaviors, bringing

awareness to individual and organizational outcomes. Ethical considerations were demonstrated through informed consent, strict guidelines set forth for data instrumentation, and maintaining confidentiality during and after the study (Durdella, 2019).

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The study intended to contribute to leadership literature to assist organizations in recognizing toxic leaders' traits and behaviors that could potentially have negative impacts on the organization and individuals. Analysis and results encompass the demographic characteristics of study participants, followed by a comprehensive delineation of the data collection and coding techniques harnessed to support the research in this study. The emphasis was placed on the participants' experiences and perceptions pertaining to temporality, sociality, and spatiality. Including the synthesis of findings, which incorporates excerpts from participants.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews occurred from November 2023 to December 2023. Eleven open-ended questions were used to investigate employees' experiences and perceptions during the interview. Fifteen interviews occurred using Zoom, the online computerized electronic platform. Zoom interviews were audio-recorded only for accuracy and transcriptions. Zoom audio recordings were deleted immediately following the review and approval by the participant for accuracy. Participants shared narratives free from judgment or preconceived biases. Confidentiality was continually upheld with alphanumeric pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2, P3...P12), preserving participant confidentiality. Interviews spanned 23 to 35 minutes.

Demographics

The population for this study included employees working for toxic leaders in organizations in the Northeast region of the United States between 2015-2023. Twenty participants responded to the recruitment letter solicitation. A total of 15 participants successfully met all requirements to be involved in the study. Participants provided demographic information during the virtual audio interview by selecting the best-aligned range for each category. Demographic information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and years of experience in the current position were all collected.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the methodological framework for data analysis, employing Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic process. Narrative inquiry allowed for a comprehensive exploration of participants' narratives, researching the intricacies of experiences and perceptions regarding toxic leadership. Participants responded to a series of targeted interview questions to elucidate the personal experiences and perceptions of leaders exhibiting toxic leadership. Participant experiences were analyzed for insights into potential strategies and best practices for mitigating the deleterious effects of toxic leadership. Phase 1 of the data analysis procedure initiated the transcription process. During Phase 1, audio recordings were methodically transcribed in Microsoft Word, reviewed, and validated by participants. Phase 2 involved the delineation of themes leading to data saturation after participants.

Phase 3 revealed additional themes within the dataset. The themes were deemed when a code recurred in the dataset on four or more instances. Microsoft Word file organization aided in the systematic categorization and arrangement of themes. Phase 4 was characterized by the refinement and continued development of the preliminary themes initially identified in Phase 3. Phase 5 entailed a comprehensive review and adjustment of the phrasing and wording of each theme to ensure maximal congruence with the content and data being represented. The attention to language refinement served to enhance the interpretive accuracy of each theme.

Phase 6 compared identified themes with research questions, to determine the degree of alignment and relevance. Figure 1 visually portrays the key findings in word cloud format. The words depicted in bold and presented in a larger font size within the word cloud represent the emergent themes most prominently and frequently during the interviews, collectively offering a succinct summary of the prevailing themes. The data analysis process culminated in the identification of five themes and two subthemes that encapsulated the multifaceted nature of participants' experiences and perceptions pertaining to toxic leadership.

RESULTS

The data analysis revealed five themes and two subthemes that encapsulated participants' diverse experiences and perceptions. The research brings forward themes and subthemes that offered a unique perspective on the impact of toxic leadership on employees' well-being, work experiences, organizational culture, and organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and morale. Themes 1, 2, and 3, addressed the first research question, identifying toxic leadership traits and behaviors exhibited by toxic leaders. Themes 4, subthemes 1 & 2 and theme 5 aligned with the second research question, by offering strategies to mitigate toxic leadership's adverse effects, enhancing morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention in organizations.

FIGURE 1 NARRATIVE RESPONSE WORD CLOUD



Theme 1: Behaviors and Traits Exhibited by Toxic Leaders: Authoritarian Behavior

Participants narratives underscored common themes portraying toxic leaders as untrustworthy, sneaky, and unsupportive, alongside their proclivity for micromanagement. Participants shed light on the authoritarian tendencies of toxic leaders, highlighting their propensity to exert excessive control. Ten of the fifteen narratives equated the underpinnings of authoritarian behavior expressed by toxic leadership within the organization. Participant 6 described toxic leaders as “untrustworthy, sneaky, unsupportive, micromanaging and are not very transparent with their intentions or expectations enforcing too much negative authority amongst employees.” Participant 13 recounted a toxic leader who exhibited micromanagement tendencies, describing the leader as someone who “wanted to control everything” and “had to be involved in every decision” like an authoritarian rule over everyone and everything.” The narrative underscored the detrimental consequences of toxic leadership, including stifling employee voices,

imposing unrealistic expectations, and creating a negative work atmosphere. The theme illuminated the multifaceted nature of toxic leadership and the pervasive impact on organizational dynamics. Participants' narratives provided an understanding of the importance of formulating strategies to identify and mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership in organizations.

Theme 2: The Lack of Empathy Among Leaders and the Impact on Work-Life Balance

Participants' shared vivid accounts illustrating how toxic leaders demonstrated a lack of compassion and understanding towards personal priorities, such as family commitments and medical emergencies. Five out of the fifteen participants narratives equated the underpinnings of the lack of empathy amongst toxic leadership and the impact on work-life balance.

Participant 4 notably expressed, "There was no empathy or compassion from my supervisor, you were expected to be available on weekends even while out with your family." Participant 10 shared an incident where their manager lacked empathy, describing the incident stating:

After having a medical crisis at work, my manager contacted me, expecting me to come into work the very next day. I was appalled by the blatant disregard and lack of empathy for my medical crisis. After that instance, I had to reprioritize what was important to me, which is my health. So, I became distant and started to make my exit strategy.

Theme 2 highlighted the critical need for leaders to cultivate empathy and prioritize employee well-being to mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership within organization. The theme helps to understand the specific traits and behaviors associated with toxic leadership, as perceived by employees.

Theme 3: Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination Within Organizational Contexts

Six of the fifteen participants narratives equated to the development of theme 3: bullying, harassment and discrimination within organizational contexts. Participant 12, provided a vivid account of discriminatory conduct in the workplace where supervisors made discriminatory remarks, targeting physical appearance, stating, "My supervisor would make discriminatory remarks about my physical appearance, like my hair and clothing. I often heard negative statements about me when I walked into meetings." Participant 15 detailed an example of an incident where students were encouraged to engage in harmful behavior from the supervisor: "The students would sneak up behind me and pop paper bags behind me to startle me. The supervisor knows I suffer from PTSD from my time in service. It was like harassing and bullying." Participants' accounts depicted a distressing and persistent pattern of overtime highlighting the temporality dimension within the theme. The experiences highlighted recurrent occurrences spanning across various times while working within the organizations. The workplace environment became characterized by fear, anxiety, and a heightened sense of scrutiny between leaders and employees. The emergence of the theme underscores the significance of exploring the relationship between toxic leadership and workplace mistreatment, providing valuable insights into the complex dynamics at play within organizational structures.

Theme 4: The Crucial Role of Clear and Open Communication in Mitigating Toxic Leadership Effects

Five of the fifteen participants narratives equated to the development of the theme elucidating the significance of open dialogue, regular team meetings, and effective communication channels in mitigating the damaging effects of toxic leadership. Participant 2 mentioned that open communication would involve "regular team meetings where ideas and concerns are freely discussed without biases welcomes open communication." Participant 7 discussed how the toxic leader lacked open communication "there were always misunderstandings on deliverables making it difficult to complete tasks in a timely fashion, clear and open communication on tasks would have eliminated all the confusion."

Participants narratives underscored instances where lack of communication resulted in misunderstandings, confusion, and a sense of disconnection within the workplace environment. The emergent theme underscores the pivotal role of transparent communication in fostering trust, collaboration, and cohesion among team members to facilitate a more conducive and harmonious work environment.

Subtheme 1: The Imperative Need to Address Diversity and Inclusion Issues

Narratives emphasized the necessity of proactively tackling and recognizing diversity and inclusion issues to cultivate a positive work environment. Four of the fifteen participants narratives underscored the importance of integrating diversity and inclusion initiatives into the strategy for combating toxic leadership effectively. Participant 1 emphasized the creation of affinity groups to support underrepresented employees, "Currently, we are participating in celebrating Breast Cancer Awareness with color-coordinated shirts. We are taking a celebratory picture and having a small celebration. This helped build a sense of camaraderie." Participant 4 discussed how their previous workplace stating: "The organization lacked diversity, which affected the overall creativity and innovation of the team. Everyone was separated, no sense of team at all."

Subtheme 2: Impact of Toxic Leadership on Mental Health and Well-Being

Participants detailed their experiences of how toxic leadership adversely affected their mental health and well-being. Four of the fifteen participants' direct quotes underscored the extreme impact of a toxic work environment on mental health, highlighting the interconnectedness of mental health and workplace dynamics.

Participant 12 recounted experiences where supervisors made discriminatory remarks that eventually played on my mental health "I would get extremely anxious before meetings and have physical reactions toward starting my day with meetings. I had to get revived up to prepare for the berating to begin at 9:05am and the day started at 9:00am. The mental and physically toll was overwhelming at times." Participants narratives emphasized the ongoing and adverse effects of toxic leadership on mental well-being, underscoring the necessity of implementing sustained measures to protect employees' mental health. Participants emphasized the role of mental health in developing strategies to mitigate the negative effects of toxic leadership and promote a healthier work environment.

Theme 5: The Pervasive Consequences of Toxic Leadership on Morale and Job Satisfaction

Six of the fifteen participants highlighted the effects of toxic leadership on morale and job satisfaction emphasizing the urgent need for organizations to address toxic leadership consequences on morale and job satisfaction to create a more positive and supportive work atmosphere." Participant 8 emphasized the importance of leadership, acknowledging employees' achievements and providing growth opportunities, "taking bits and pieces of positivity helps boost morale, teams grow stronger, and growing your staff is equally as important." Participant 6 stated, "Key performance Indicators or bonuses should be partly contingent upon how employees develop and thrive in the organization. These performance indicators can be used to track morale and job satisfaction."

The theme underscored the significant role of leadership behavior in shaping employees' perceptions and experiences within the workplace, highlighting the importance of implementing strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership on morale and job satisfaction. Participants recognized that mitigating the impact on morale and job satisfaction is a long-term commitment through accountability surveys and 360 reviews of organizational leaders. Participants underscored the significant role of leadership in shaping the social dynamics of the workplace.

Summary

This qualitative narrative inquiry study investigated the intricate dimensions of the toxic leadership phenomenon as experienced and perceived by employees working within organizations in the Northeast region of the United States. The narratives collected from participants revolved around temporality, sociality, and spatiality, providing a comprehensive viewpoint of their experiences. Temporality was revealed in Theme 1, 2, and 3 addressing research question 1, uncovering the presence of toxic leaders' behaviors and traits and uncovering how toxic leaders lack empathy and how bullying, harassment, and discrimination relate to the characteristics of toxic leadership over time in organizations. Theme 4 uncovered and addressed research question 2 revealing the importance of communication in understanding and dealing with toxic leadership. The theme highlighted the ongoing need for clear communication to

assist employees with effectively completing organizational tasks, uncovering the temporality and sociality dynamics within participants narratives.

Participants highlighted the dynamic of sociality by expounding on the consequences of a lack of empathy, bullying, harassment, and discrimination on employees' well-being, reducing interpersonal relationships, eroding trust, mental health, and morale in organizations. The impact of employees' emotional and physical environments resulted in the demise of the cultural environment, creating a hostile work environment in organizations, and depicting the dynamic of spatiality.

Theme 4 uncovered and addressed research question 2 revealing the importance of communication in understanding and dealing with toxic leadership. The theme highlighted the ongoing need for clear communication to assist employees with effectively completing organizational tasks, uncovering the temporality and sociality dynamics within participants' narratives. Participants emphasized the positive impact of open communication between employees and leaders to work effectively together towards completing organizational goals, creating a healthier work environment and uncovering the dimension of spatiality. Subtheme 1 underscored and addressed research question 2 the importance of addressing diversity and inclusion concerns as part of the strategies to combat toxic leadership within organizations. Emphasizing the ongoing need to address toxic leadership and stresses the significance of inclusivity in fostering positive workplace relationships and promoting a more equitable workplace environment within organizations.

Subtheme 2 illuminated and addressed research question 2, illuminating the toll of toxic leadership on mental health in organizations. Illustrating how toxic leadership affects the social aspect of employees' lives within the organization under toxic leaders. The theme further emphasized the influence of toxic leadership on the emotional and physical workplace environment, uncovering the social and spatial dynamics of toxic leadership in organizations. Theme 5 emphasized the temporality dynamic and addressed research question 2 by highlighting the ongoing impact of toxic leadership on morale in organizations. Participants depicted how the consequences of toxic leadership affected the social dynamics of the workplace, underscoring the creation of a negative work atmosphere because of toxic leadership.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to develop a deeper understanding of the toxic leadership phenomenon through the experiences and perceptions of employees to learn strategies and best practices to mitigate toxic leadership, increase productivity, enhance job satisfaction, increase morale and retention in an organization in the Northeast region of the United States. The study aimed to provide organizations and leaders with research to educate and gain understanding of toxic leadership experiences that affect morale and retention. Addressing a significant knowledge gap in understanding toxic leadership in organizational contexts through exploring the experiences and perceptions of individuals working under toxic leaders in the Northeastern United States. The research aimed to provide valuable insights that can support organizations and leaders in implementing strategies and best practices to mitigate the impact of toxic leadership, improve job satisfaction, and boost morale in environments where toxic leadership is prevalent. Furthermore, this research contributes to existing literature by helping organizations recognize the traits and behaviors associated with toxic leaders, which can have detrimental effects on both the organization and its members.

Discussion of Findings

The study employed the full-range leadership model as a framework to investigate the real-life experiences and perceptions of individuals operating within organizations (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018; Serrat, 2021). Gemada and Lee (2020) conducted research to investigate the impact of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles on work outcomes in organizational contexts. These findings align with existing research by Arenas et al. (2017), suggesting that leaders who emulate transactional and laissez-faire leadership aspects can harm organizational outcomes.

Theme 1: Behaviors and Traits Exhibited by Toxic Leaders: Authoritarian Behavior

The first theme, *Behaviors and Traits Exhibited by Toxic Leaders: Authoritarian Behavior*, revealed participants' diverse understandings of toxic leadership. Toxic leaders often exhibit negative, controlling, and manipulative behaviors, resulting in adverse organizational outcomes (Pelletier, 2010; Rasool et al., 2018). Participants' perceptions encompassed traits such as untrustworthiness, sneakiness, lack of support, micromanagement, and a dearth of transparency regarding leaders' intentions and expectations. Despite nuanced differences, common traits attributed to toxic leaders included control, manipulation, and a lack of support. In the context of leadership studies, the findings align with leadership styles categorized as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Toxic leadership often falls under the transactional category, emphasizing control and compliance issues as informed by Participants, "There were unfair expectations with abuse of power, and no accountability." The findings further emphasized the importance of hierarchical control mechanisms in organizational control theory, which can lead to authoritarian behaviors when misused (Gossett, 2012; Verburg et al. 2018).

Participants underscored behaviors and traits such as micromanagement, control, mistrust, untrustworthiness, sneakiness, lack of support, opacity in communication, authoritarianism, dictatorship, and ineffective communication, which burdened employees and created stifling and mean-spirited atmospheres. The toxic behaviors discussed by participants were noted to be enduring, persisting over extended periods, and resulting in negative transformations within the organizational environment.

Participants divulged the need to internalize interactions with leaders over time, necessitating a comprehensive exploration of perceptions. The persistent behaviors displayed by leaders appeared in participants expressing feelings of discouragement, anxiety, a lack of motivation to complete tasks, and depression. The emotions expressed by participants are significantly linked to exposure to toxic leadership behaviors and traits. Each participant's interaction with leaders revealed varying definitions of toxic leadership, underscoring the evolutionary nature of perceptions over time.

The differing perceptions highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of how employees internalize toxic leadership behaviors and traits. Participants' experiences illuminated the significance of the social workplace dynamic, exposing how toxic leadership traits profoundly impacted morale, and job satisfaction. The adverse effects led to a sense of disconnection among colleagues. The vivid illustrations of experiences provided by participants highlighted how toxic leadership behaviors eroded interpersonal relationships, undermined team cohesion, and disrupted the broader social fabric of the organization. Participants further divulged experiences of toxic leadership behaviors resulting in disconnection from the organization, which in turn affected the emotional and physical environments within the organization. The atmosphere, as characterized by participants, fostered fear, scrutiny, and the specter of retaliation, contributing to heightened stress levels and anxiety among employees. The spatial dimension underscored the substantial impact of toxic leadership on the overall workplace environment, emphasizing the urgency of identifying and addressing toxic leadership behaviors and traits in organizations.

Theme 2: The Lack of Empathy Among Leaders and the Impact on Work-Life Balance

The second theme, *The Lack of Empathy Among Leaders and The Impact on Work-Life Balance*, shed light on the perceived absence of empathy exhibited by toxic leaders, particularly concerning family commitments. Tepper (2007) emphasized the leaders' characteristics related to undermining qualities, where employees express work-related resentment. Participants recounted instances where supervisors demonstrated little compassion for their personal lives, leading to an exhausting work environment devoid of work-life balance. "There was no work-life balance and if you left work on time at the end of your day you were criticized." Toxic leaders were frequently described as unsympathetic, insincere, and indifferent to the struggles and challenges faced by employees.

The theme underscores the significant impact of a leader on employee well-being and job satisfaction, which is in line with existing research emphasizing that subordinates of destructive leaders experience lower levels of job satisfaction, leading to an increased likelihood of an employee leaving the company (Erickson et al., 2015). Participants described the roles of transformational leadership in fostering empathy, support, and consideration for follower's needs. Toxic leaders, in contrast, exhibit a lack of these

transformational qualities. The findings are consistent with existing literature highlighting that toxic leaders frequently lack empathy and fail to consider the emotions and well-being of employees, which negatively affects employees' mental health and retention in organizations (Lipman-Blumen, 2010).

The social workplace dynamic was illuminated through participant experiences, revealing how the absence of empathy profoundly affected the social workplace dynamic. The pervasive lack of empathy created an environment where employees felt unsupported, undervalued, secluded, and detached from other colleagues, resulting in deteriorating social relationships within the organization. The absence of empathy further highlighted the spatial dynamic through the impact on the workplace environment amongst employees and leaders. Participants' narratives revealed toxic leaders' lack of empathy fostered an atmosphere characterized by stress and heightened anxiety. The spatial dimension highlighted the substantial influence of toxic leadership on the overall workplace environment, underscoring the urgency of addressing the lack of empathy displayed by toxic leaders in organizations.

Theme 3: Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination Within Organizational Contexts

The third theme unveiled distressing accounts of bullying, harassment, and discrimination within organizational contexts. Participants recalled incidents where supervisors made discriminatory remarks, often targeting physical appearance, and engaging in offensive behavior. One participant expressed negative comments about their hair style during leadership meetings. Such toxic behaviors created hostile work environments and negatively impacted participants' mental health. Participants described physical stress responses like sweating, nervousness, and anxiety. Toxic leaders manage to poison organizations (Laguda, 2022). The study's findings closely parallel existing literature on toxic leadership, which frequently encompasses behaviors such as bullying and harassment that result in hostile work environments as described by Participants 6 and 8 (Erickson et al., 2015). Transformational leadership promotes an inclusive and respectful work environment, which the behaviors exhibited by toxic leaders starkly contrast. Oprea & Iliescu (2022) conducted a study relating transformational leadership to positively motivating employees and deterring negative workplace behaviors such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Theme 4: The Crucial Role of Clear and Open Communication in Mitigating Toxic Leadership Effects

The Crucial Role of Clear and Open Communication in Mitigating Toxic Leadership Effects emerged as the fourth theme, underscoring the pivotal role of clear and transparent communication in mitigating the adverse effects of toxic leadership. Expressed directives were unclear and often resulted in tasks being completed incorrectly and the employee being responsible for the error. Toxic leaders hinder open communication within organizations, which can contribute to a culture of fear and silence. Tepper (2007) discussed the negative impact of abusive supervision on employee well-being and highlighted the importance of open communication in mitigating the adverse effects of toxic leadership. The detrimental impact on employee morale made it challenging for employees to voice their concerns, driving considerations to leave the organization. Participants expressed a need for regular team meetings to facilitate the open exchange of ideas and concerns without bias. Conversely, a lack of open communication led to misunderstandings, employee silence, and a sense of disconnection from organizational goals, as aligned with (Saqib & Arif, 2017). The theme aligns with the established literature by Reyhanoglu & Akin (2022), highlighting the significance of effective communication in building trust and improving organizational outcomes.

Toxic leaders, by contrast, tend to hinder open communication. Bakker et al. (2022) used the full-range leadership model to explore the impact of transformational leadership behaviors, including intellectual stimulation and individual consideration, on employee work engagement. The research underscores the significance of open communication, as inspired by employees take personal initiative to confront challenges. Leaders who exhibit inspiring and stimulating characteristics were found to positively influence job satisfaction. The outcome aligns with a broader examination of the influence of full-range leadership styles and the implications for job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and morale in organizations (Bakker & Woerkom, 2018; Mathieu & Babiak, 2015).

Subtheme 1: The Imperative Need to Address Diversity and Inclusion Issues in Cultivating Healthier Workplace Cultures

Subtheme 1, The Imperative Need to Address Diversity and Inclusion Issues in Cultivating Healthier Workplace Cultures, emphasized the necessity of addressing diversity and inclusion issues to foster healthier workplace cultures, as narrated “we built our own sense camaraderie to build relationships amongst colleagues.” Participants stressed the importance of proactively tackling these issues to create more equitable workplaces, as experienced by Participants who described teambuilding, diversity, and inclusion trainings for leaders to understand the sensitive needs of diverse populations. These findings align with contemporary discussions on the vital role of diversity and inclusion in organizations, contributing to a healthier work environment. Williams (2018), who emphasized the importance of proactively addressing diversity and inclusion concerns. Toxic leaders may create an environment where diversity and inclusion are undervalued, as Pelletier (2010) noted, further highlighting the theme’s relevance. Rasool et al. (2018) underscored how toxic leadership can lead to a lack of inclusivity and equity, emphasizing the need to promptly address diversity and inclusion issues. Toxic leaders, on the other hand, often overlook these principles. An inclusive and diverse workforce contributes to organizational success, which toxic leadership may hinder.

Subtheme 2: Impact of Toxic Leadership on Mental Health and Well-Being

Participants shared experiences of how toxic leadership detrimentally affected their mental health and well-being, detailing heightened feelings of stress. The toll of toxic leadership on mental health was poignantly described, with participants reporting heightened anxiety, physical reactions, and increased stress levels. The theme underscores the critical importance of addressing mental health concerns within organizations, particularly in the context of toxic leadership. Syahruddin et al. (2022) discussed how toxic leadership led to heightened anxiety and stress levels, corroborating the focus of the theme on the toll of toxic leadership on mental health. Erickson et al. (2015) emphasized that toxic leaders’ behaviors can hurt employees’ mental health, supporting the notion that toxic leadership is indeed associated with adverse effects on mental well-being. Furthermore, Lipman-Blumen (2010) highlighted how toxic leadership behaviors can result in emotional and psychological harm to employees, further reinforcing the theme’s emphasis on the impact on mental health.

Theme 5: The Pervasive Consequences of Toxic Leadership on Morale and Job Satisfaction.

The final theme, *The Pervasive Consequences of Toxic Leadership on Morale and Job Satisfaction*, reflected the pervasive consequences of toxic leadership on participants’ overall well-being and job-related attitudes. Participants discussed the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on morale, and job satisfaction, as expressed in participant narratives. These findings affirm the notion that toxic leadership can profoundly affect organizational culture and employee retention “I just wanted to appease my leader at the end of the day; the culture made me never want to be there and I left the organization because of the leader, I just couldn’t take it anymore”. The theme aligns with existing literature, as Jung-Gehling and Strauss (2018) linked toxic leadership to low morale, decreased job satisfaction, and diminished overall job performance. The findings resonate with the focus on the adverse impact of toxic leadership on morale and job satisfaction. Tepper (2007) discussed how toxic leadership can erode employee morale and job satisfaction, supporting the theme’s assertion that toxic leadership has detrimental effects on job satisfaction, morale, productivity, and retention in organizations.

Pelletier (2010) mentioned that toxic leaders’ behaviors can result in negative organizational outcomes, including low morale and job satisfaction, reinforcing the theme’s significance in understanding the consequences of toxic leadership. Participants stressed the value of diversity and inclusion training for leaders as initiatives to contribute to an equitable and harmonious social dynamic within the organization. The lack of diversity and inclusion reflected in participants’ experiences depicted a workplace environment where participants endured the consequences of an exclusive culture. Participants alluded to toxic leadership worsening the spatial dynamics of the organization, uncovering the imperative nature of addressing diversity and inclusion concerns as a part of a comprehensive strategy to encourage the need for

organizations to create an environment where employees from diverse backgrounds feel valued, heard, and included.

Limitations

This study acknowledged limitations that could have influenced the research findings. First, the study's temporal scope was constrained by the accessibility of documents and employees, focusing primarily on data collected from participant experiences between 2015 and 2023. Second, achieving data saturation, a crucial aspect of qualitative research, was another potential limitation. Data saturation occurs when no new information or themes emerge from participant responses (Billups, 2021). Efforts were made to recruit voluntary participants who would openly share their experiences and perceptions; the extent to which saturation was researched was 15 participants who willingly provided candid insight for data analysis. These acknowledged limitations provided context for the study's scope and the potential implications for generalizability, highlighting areas for consideration in future research endeavors to further explore toxic leadership within organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO LEADERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Considering the findings from this study, a set of comprehensive recommendations can be formulated to guide leaders and practitioners in addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with toxic leadership in organizations. First, leaders are encouraged to address the behaviors and traits of toxic leaders by actively fostering inclusive and collaborative organizational cultures. Creating an environment where employees feel heard, valued, and engaged is paramount. Decision-making processes should be made transparent and participatory, enabling employees to contribute meaningfully to organizations. Practitioners can provide valuable support by designing and delivering training programs and workshops emphasizing shared decision-making, inclusivity, and collaboration. Second, to promote empathy among leaders, it is recommended that the organization's leaders undergo training and development programs specifically focused on empathy-building skills.

These initiatives can enhance leaders' ability to understand and empathize with employees' needs and concerns, both professionally and personally. Practitioners can play a crucial role in designing and delivering these training programs, facilitating the development of empathetic leadership qualities. Addressing the theme of bullying, harassment, and discrimination requires organizations to establish clear policies and procedures for reporting and handling such incidents with strict accountability measures. Leaders must actively enforce a zero-tolerance policy for these behaviors and ensure compliance. Practitioners can collaborate with organizations to develop and implement effective anti-bullying and anti-harassment training programs, educating employees about their rights and responsibilities.

In enhancing open communication, leaders should prioritize open and transparent communication within their organizations. Ensuring regular team meetings, open-door policies, and feedback mechanisms that empower employees to voice concerns without fear of reprisal. Practitioners can offer guidance in creating communication strategies that foster openness and ensure the free flow of information throughout the organization. Promoting diversity and inclusion necessitates proactive efforts by leaders to create diverse and inclusive workplaces. The absence of inclusive and supportive leadership was palpable and better fit in the organization, as expressed by participants' experiences in the workplace. The spatiality manifested through experiences as instances of hostile commentary, discriminatory remarks, and even intimidation that contributed to the overall environment becoming distressed and filled with anxiety. The theme sheds light on the distressing and persistent nature of bullying, harassment, and discrimination within toxic leadership.

The toxic behaviors discussed by participants negatively affected the social workplace dynamic, eroding trust and cohesion among colleagues. Participants highlighted the creation of emotionally charged work environments that adversely affect employees' well-being within the organization. Participants' experiences underscored the need for organizations to address and rectify toxic leadership behaviors to foster healthier and more inclusive workplaces. Adopting recruitment and morale strategies that prioritize

diversity and foster a culture of inclusion where all employees feel valued and respected can be benefits to the organization. Practitioners can assist leaders in designing and implementing diversity and inclusion programs tailored to the specific needs of their organizations. Addressing mental health concerns involves leaders prioritizing employee mental health and well-being. Providing support programs such as counseling services and stress management workshops is essential. Creating a stigma-free environment around mental health is equally important. Practitioners can collaborate with leaders to develop and implement mental health initiatives customized to the unique requirements of their organizations.

Boosting morale and job satisfaction entails leaders actively seeking ways to recognize and reward employee contributions, providing opportunities for skill development, and fostering positive work environments. Practitioners can contribute by aiding leaders in designing and executing employee engagement programs that align with the organization's specific objectives. These recommendations offer a comprehensive approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by toxic leadership. By taking deliberate actions in response to these recommendations, leaders and practitioners can work towards creating healthier, more productive, and more inclusive work environments. The following table summarizes the recommendations.

TABLE 7
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Theme	Recommendations
Behaviors and Traits Exhibited by Toxic leaders: Authoritarian Behavior	Cultivate inclusive and collaborative cultures; offer training programs for shared decision-making.
The Lack of Empathy Among Leader and The Impact on Work Life Balance	Provide empathy-building training for leaders; develop empathetic leadership qualities.
Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination Within Organizational Contexts	Establish clear policies and reporting procedures; enforce a zero-tolerance policy; implement anti-bullying and anti-harassment training programs.
The Crucial Role of Clear and Open Communication in Mitigating Toxic Leadership Effects	Prioritize transparent communication; create feedback mechanisms; develop communication strategies.
*Subtheme 1 The Imperative Need to Address Diversity and Inclusion Issues in Cultivating Healthier Workplace Cultures	Implement diversity and inclusion strategies; foster an inclusive culture; design diversity and inclusion programs.
*Subtheme 2 Impact of Toxic Leadership on Mental Health and Well-being	Offer mental health support programs; create stigma-free environments; develop mental health initiatives.
The Pervasive Consequences of Toxic Leadership on Morale and Job Satisfaction	Prioritize employee well-being; recognize and reward contributions; offer skill development opportunities; foster positive work environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has laid the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of toxic leadership and the repercussions within organizations. However, there remain several avenues for future research that can further enrich our knowledge of the toxic leadership phenomenon. Future research should consider adopting a longitudinal approach to assess the long-term impact of toxic leadership. Longitudinal phenomenological studies would provide valuable insights into how toxic leadership behaviors unfold over time and the enduring effects on both individuals and organizations.

A cross-cultural examination of toxic leadership is essential for understanding how cultural factors shape the manifestation and consequences. Comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts can help identify variations in toxic leadership behaviors and the effects. Employing mixed-method approaches, including surveys and qualitative interviews, can facilitate a comprehensive exploration of cross-cultural differences in toxic leadership. Third, future research should focus on developing and evaluating intervention strategies to combat toxic leadership. Collaborative efforts with organizations can lead to implementing and assessing leadership development programs and interventions aimed at addressing toxic behaviors.

Experimental and quasi-experimental research designs can provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such interventions in reducing toxic leadership and improving organizational outcomes. Delving into the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by employees facing toxic leadership is a promising avenue for future research. Research on how toxic leadership impacts organizational innovation and creativity may be a pragmatic approach. Research in this area can investigate how toxic behaviors hinder creative thinking, innovation, and the development of a conducive creative work environment. Surveys, case studies, and organizational assessments can provide insights into the relationship between toxic leadership and innovation outcomes. Ethical leadership's potential role in mitigating the effects of toxic leadership should be examined. Research can assess whether ethical leaders within organizations act as a protective factor against the adverse consequences of toxic leadership. Through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the impact of ethical leadership on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational outcomes in the context of toxic leadership can be explored. These recommendations collectively offer a roadmap for future research endeavors in the domain of toxic leadership. By addressing these research areas, scholars can contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies for preventing and alleviating the detrimental effects of toxic leadership within organizations.

Summary

Toxic leaders were characterized by an array of adverse and abusive traits and behaviors, encompassing authoritarianism, control, micromanagement, mistrust, untrustworthiness, lack of empathy among leader and the impact on work-life balance, engagement in bullying, harassment, and discrimination within organizational contexts, impact of toxic leadership on mental health and well-being, pervasive consequences on morale and job satisfaction, along with a notable deficiency in cultivating open lines of communication. These findings substantiated the existing body of literature, reaffirming the pervasive nature of toxic leadership across varied organizational landscapes. To address the injurious repercussions of toxic leadership, the study engendered an array of recommendations tailored for leaders and practitioners. These propositions encompassed imperative insights for leaders to embrace transformational leadership paradigms, accord precedence to empathy and transparent communication, champion diversity and inclusivity, and prioritize employees' mental health and overall well-being.

These prescriptive measures were firmly grounded in the study's empirical findings and the extant scholarly corpus, offering actionable insights to organizations endeavoring to ameliorate the scourge of toxic leadership. This study may provide valuable information and cogent responses to the research questions may enrich the corpus of knowledge about toxic leadership. This study recruited employees from various urban city organizations in the Northeast region of the United States to gain a holistic comprehension of the attributes of toxic leaders, coupled with proffering pragmatic methodologies for countervailing their deleterious influence. By illuminating the experiences and perceptions of employees, the study may contribute to the discourse on toxic leadership, equipping organizations with instrumental tools to cultivate salubrious workplace cultures, engender the well-being of their employees, and enhance the overarching efficiency of the organizational milieu.

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APPENDIX 1: REVISED FIELD TEST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Questions

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity
4. Education level
5. Years experience in your current position

1. Please share the traits and behaviors of a toxic leader that you experienced in the workplace and explain how this experience could influence your **future career**.
2. Please share the actions of a toxic leader that you experienced in the workplace.
3. Describe specific scenarios that involved you and a toxic leader in the workplace and how the **culture and your own personal values** influenced the experiences during these scenarios?
4. How did these specific scenarios with a toxic leader in the workplace directly impact your career?
5. How did toxic leaders affect the morale in your organization?
6. Besides low morale, what other problems (if any), were experienced in your organization as a direct result from toxic leaders?
7. Based on your experience with toxic leaders, what successful strategies contributed to mitigating the behaviors of toxic leaders?
8. Explain how your organization takes preventive measures to promote a non-toxic work environment.
9. Describe the **environmental surroundings** in your organization during the toxic relationship that influenced your strategies to reduce toxic leaders in your organization.
10. What best practices contributed to a culture free of toxic leaders in your organization?
11. If you were a leader in your organization, what strategies would you implement to enhance morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention in your organization?

APPENDIX 2: INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Question 1: Could you describe traits, behaviors, or actions that you associate with toxic leaders, drawing from your personal experiences during your tenure at the local agency?

Interview Question 2: Can you recount specific instances or scenarios that stand out to you as examples of leadership behaviors within the agency? How did these behaviors impact you and your colleagues?

Interview Question 3: How did the characteristics of toxic leaders manifest in your day-to-day interactions and overall work environment at the local agency? What emotions or feelings were elicited by these experiences?

Interview Question 4: Considering your encounters with toxic leadership, can you share any instances where you or your colleagues' implemented strategies or practices to counteract the negative effects? What were the outcomes of these efforts?

Interview Question 5: Based on your experiences, what do you believe would be effective approaches to mitigating the adverse impact of toxic leadership on employee morale, job satisfaction, productivity, and retention within the local agency?

Interview Question 6: Could you reflect on any specific instances where positive leadership practices or interventions successfully counterbalanced the adverse effects of toxic leadership? How did these practices influence your perceptions and experiences?

Interview Question 7: Are there any additional details or insights you would like to provide about your encounters during your tenure at the agency?