

UNDERSTANDING TOXIC LEADERSHIP: TYPOLOGIES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *Toxic leadership reflects a major, pervasive, yet underexplored challenge in contemporary organizational management. Given the present trends, the article provides a theoretical insight into the main conceptualizations, typologies, and outcomes of this leadership style, while elaborating on an integrative framework for exploring its mechanisms and coping strategies. Seen through the lens of the “toxic triangle” model and subsequent designs, the work follows the interaction between individual traits, follower susceptibility, and organizational context. By reviewing main evidence-based strategies, results emphasize the need for a systemic, culture-centered response, in addition to personality paradigms and workplace social cohesion.*

Key words: *toxic leadership, organizational culture, coping strategies.*

1. Introduction

Leadership, as a longstanding thematic of paramount importance for organizational studies, has been researched multifaceted, its role and impact on all levels and components of an organization being recognized as a main factor, influencing a series of desirable outputs such as team performance, well-being, and success (Northouse, 2018). Given the complex organizational life and its rapid transformation, the leadership construct benefited from extensive scholarly literature attention and research, frequently associated with vision, motivation strategies, development, engagement, and trust, while providing meaning in continuously changing social contexts (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Beyond the classical leadership styles, new types have emerged and solicited attention in the last years, among which toxic leadership makes no exception (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Kellerman, 2004). In part, the focus has brought a higher interest, especially for negative outcomes and consequences of such leadership styles and pattern behaviors, which affect the individual-employee level, as well as group-team and organizational level. Exploring toxic leadership can be essential for understanding how power and influence have negative impacts within organizations, as well as their implications for organizational health and pathologies, team functioning, and cultural integrity.

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The purpose of this article is to provide a theoretically structured synthesis on the main typologies regarding toxic leadership, its socio-psychological mechanisms, and its best-known prevention and intervention strategies, following the scholarly literature. In this view, the paper addresses the following questions:

1. How is toxic leadership conceptualized within the social sciences?
2. What dominant toxic leadership typologies are present in the scholarly literature?
3. What coping strategies have been addressed more frequently with regard to toxic leadership?

2. Conceptual Framework

For the last two decades, scholars have tried to capture the instances of toxic leadership in terms of negative outcomes, undesired behaviors, or organizational pathological forms, discussing concepts such as abusive or ineffective. Kellerman (2004, p. 5) introduced and defined the term "bad leadership" as a destructive behavior generated by the lack of skills and moral decay. In this view, "bad leadership" can be potentially associated with incompetence, rigidity, corruption, or callousness. The concept of "toxic leadership" emerged in the scholarly literature as an explanatory term describing a governance style inside organizations, which, although relying on charisma and the ability to achieve desired results, works through and leads to prejudicing others, harming individuals, and the organization itself (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). As a result, toxic leadership dysfunctions describe a systemic, large-scale problem, which affects the entire organizational culture (Frost, 2003; Brown & Treviño, 2006). When focusing on hostile leadership behaviors towards the subordinates, the term "abusive supervision" was introduced by Tepper (2000). Besides this moral perspective, based on the poor relational capacity of the leader, in terms of incapacity to achieve performance, the concepts of "ineffective" or "dysfunctional" leadership were proposed (Kellerman, 2004; Einarsen et al., 2007). In comparison and apart from the above-mentioned concepts, toxic leadership refers to both individual and organizational pathology, with aspects of ethical deficiencies, moral or psychological toxicity (Hogan & Hogan, 2001), highly challenging and negative to the entire organizational climate.

The Toxic Triangle Model (Padilla et al., 2007, p. 176) represents a valuable framework for conceptualizing toxic leadership as a result of three main components: the leader (defined as destructive, narcissistic, authoritarian), the followers (presented as susceptible, compliant, conformist, opportunistic), and the environment (described as conducive, unstable, lacking accountability, harboring toxic culture). Following the model, Schmidt operationalized the construct in 2008, by designing a Toxic Leadership Scale, which addresses five behavioral dimensions (Labrague, 2024): authority abuse, self-centeredness, self-promotion, narcissism, and unpredictability. Providing empirical grounding, this behavioral approach sets the boundaries between toxic leadership and other types of organizational dysfunctions or pathologies, like temporary stressful situations or authoritarian, ethical, and goal-oriented leadership styles. In addition, the psychodynamic perspective explains that defensive narcissistic individuals are more

prone to becoming toxic leaders, as they tend to express their insecurities through manipulation, control, and dominance (Kets de Vries, 2006). As for the specific mechanisms that support toxic leadership expression at work, projection and idealization act, alongside the followers' dependency needs, in consolidating this style. Other research works referred to "toxic emotions" as a concept that describes the organizational outcomes generated by this leadership style and suggested that emotional intelligence might play a reparative role in such contexts (Frost, 2003).

From the organizational culture perspective, one can understand that toxic leadership and its set of destructive behaviors, in general, can be tolerated, or even legitimized on one hand, supporting the development of organizational pathologies, or punished within organizations and corrected on the other hand, depending on the specific organizational culture present at the time. An organizational climate dominated by fear, conformity, competition, and toxicity is the result of systemic dysfunctions. Both expectations of leadership and collective tolerance to toxicity are shaped according to the specific organizational culture (Schein, 2010). More recent studies confirm that followers' coping responses - fight, flight, or freeze - reflect not only individual resilience but also the degree of organizational support available (Webster et al., 2016).

In conclusion, toxic leadership consists of a multidimensional construct, encompassing psychological, moral, behavioral, and contextual aspects. Moreover, when understanding leadership through an organizational pathology lens, context, personality, organizational culture, and collective dynamics become mandatory for analysis and should be closely addressed. The importance of conceptualizing and operationalizing the construct of toxic leadership resides in its relevance for practice. Several recent empirical studies demonstrate an increased interest in this matter (Herbst & Roux, 2023; Arbogast & Jadav, 2024; Lopes et al., 2025). For example, a study on 559 respondents from the medical primary care services, which also focused on validating a toxic leadership scale, showed that toxic supervision lowered employees' well-being, which negatively affected engagement (Cakiroglu & Unver, 2024). Cakiroglu and Unver's (2024) structural equation model explains the negative effects of toxic leadership on organizational engagement through the mediating role of well-being.

Similarly, in a cross-national study among nurses in Finland, destructive leadership and high job demands were strongly associated with burnout, while job resources (such as support, autonomy, meaningful feedback) mitigated this relationship (Palvimo et al., 2023).

Research showed, as exemplified by the above-described studies, that toxic leadership negatively affects a series of desirable organizational aspects, such as work engagement or well-being. Same studies highlighted mediating and moderating factors that can buffer the negative consequences of such toxic organizational contexts.

These recent findings reinforce the theoretical models of toxic leadership (such as the toxic triangle or trait-behavioral models), through concept extension and comprehension, methodology development, and organizational patterns approach. In addition to presenting the negative consequences of toxic leadership, there is a growing interest in possible points of intervention focusing on well-being, available resources, trust, and group dynamics, which can reduce harmful effects and preserve organizational health even when such behaviors are present.

3. Toxic Leadership Typologies

Inside the scholarly literature, toxic leadership, as a distinct pattern, embraces multiple forms, reflecting various specific destructive behaviors and mechanisms. Types such as the authoritarian, the narcissistic, the manipulative, the passive-destructive, and the Machiavellian are quite common in descriptions of recent studies (Bublitz-Berg et al., 2024; Arbogast & Jadav, 2024; Ivan & Pavalache-Ilie, 2024; Lopes et al., 2025). As a brief overview, each of these organizational pathology typologies will be described in this section.

The authoritarian type refers to leaders who impose strict hierarchies, intimidate, strictly control subordinates, creating employee dependency, and are also defined as an abusive leadership style (Tepper, 2000). Such leaders suppress autonomy and initiative, generate fear and low-morale behaviors, reduce employee performance and motivation, negatively impact job and work satisfaction, all the way to mental health, vulnerability, and work health.

Charismatic and visionary leaders are considered to be beneficial for organizations, but when they are self-centered, excessively sensitive to criticism, organizational trust and ethics are undermined (Kets de Vries, 2006). The lack of empathy, the instrumentalization of subordinates, grandiosity, self-admiration, and self-promotion become specific features for narcissistic leadership (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). On many occasions, despite the powerful willingness to attain organizational objectives and work performance, a narcissistic leadership style will result in overloading work strategies for the employee, unidirectional communication, and fewer channels for expression, alongside a total segregation from the decision-making process.

In the case of paranoid or manipulative leaders, the preoccupation resides in excessive information control, dominance, and conflict exploitation (Padilla et al., 2007). This typology fosters suspicions and divisions within work groups and teams, perverting the organizational climate into an insecure context, conflicting interests, and tiring "games" for power and gains.

The passive-destructive leadership style, to some extent, is also observed in the classical laissez-faire style of governance follows a partial or total disengagement from the organization, practicing inactivity, avoiding responsibility, work detachment, and interactions. The lack of work involvement, missing out on objectives, direction, structure and vision, will eventually demotivate employees, will enhance role-ambiguity, and even work chaos (Einarsen et al., 2007).

Consistent with the first conceptualizations, the Machiavellian leadership style describes the exclusive pursuit of personal advantages in spite of group or organizational ones, manipulating others without any form of compassion (Hogan & Hogan, 2001, p. 43). The style is differentiated from others through its unique degree of control, calculated behavior targets and strategies, patience, ethical or moral aspects avoidance. The style profile may present itself as rational and goal-oriented, yet the instrumental approach to human relations will eventually erode employee trust and long-term cohesion at work. Scientific research indicates that these typologies may often overlap and coexist within the same style of leading, suggesting that toxic leadership should be viewed as a

multidimensional construct, which combines personality traits, behavioral patterns, and contextual reinforcements (Padilla et al., 2007; Labrague, 2024).

Overall, types and expressions of toxic leadership are prone to organizational settings, experiences, roles and interactions that, whether formal or informal, will impact to a certain extent and degree employee life and the organization's functioning.

4. Toxic Leadership Outcomes

Toxic leadership exerts significant and multi-level consequences across psychological, interpersonal, and organizational sectors. At the individual-employee level, exposure to toxic leaders is strongly associated with emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and reduced well-being (Frost, 2003; Aboyassin & Abood, 2013; Webster et al., 2016). Previous research describes multiple negative effects of toxic leadership, indicating for example, the followers' "fight, flight, or freeze" responses as coping mechanisms, leading to disengagement, absenteeism, or counterproductive behaviors (Webster et al., 2016).

At the group-team level, employees are affected by low degrees of trust and cohesion, lack of cooperation, increased fear, and competition (Schein, 2010). The scholarly literature suggests that to an extent, the leadership behavioral models are internalized by the employees and then replicated, thus maintaining, disseminating and developing abusive or unethical patterns of conduct at work (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Apart from the individual-employee and group-team levels, the organization makes no exception from the damaging effects of toxic leadership, encountering overall performance and profit reduction, reputation damage, high turnover rates, resources depletion and economic instability. For example, Hogan and Hogan (2001), explained that a leadership style characterized by destructive behavior, narcissism, paranoia, just to mention a few, reside into dysfunctional practices that will harm in the long term the organization's sustainability.

As presented in the theoretical framework, toxic leadership should be viewed in the context of multiple interactions between management and employees, with each organizational environment importing distinct features. Coming back to the toxic triangle model, which conceptualizes these dynamics as an interaction between destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments (Padilla et al., 2007), it must be stated that this systemic view highlights toxicity not simply as an individual pathology but a relational and contextual phenomenon, that can thrive in environments lacking ethical safeguards or accountability mechanisms. Other studies have emphasized that the presence and especially persistence of toxic leadership is also bound or supported by the followers' psychological needs for security, belonging, and meaning, even in oppressive contexts (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Hou, 2017).

In conclusion, toxic leadership's negative outcomes extend beyond job satisfaction and employee performance, affecting organizational culture and climate, turnover rates, overall physical or mental health of employees, challenging the organization's core functioning, stability and development.

5. Coping Strategies

Overall research highlights, as described in previous sections, that toxic leadership is not only a product of individual organizational pathology but also an organizational level problem, a “symptom” of permissive organizational cultures and inadequate accountability systems (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla et al., 2007; Goldman, 2009).

Consequently, effective interventions require a multi-level understanding and approach, integrating actions at individual-employee, group-team, and organizational levels. In the next section, we summarized the existing validated possible directions of intervention, as proposed in the scholarly literature, on the three levels of interest: individual, group, and organizational.

5.1. Individual Level – Self-Management

At the individual level, interventions may refer either to employees' specific cases, as well as to the management representatives. Thus, individuals exposed to toxic leadership often experience stress, burnout, and emotional dissonance (Bublitz-Berg et al., 2024). Coping strategies identified in empirical studies include emotional regulation, boundary setting, and seeking social support (Webster et al., 2016; Glover & McClain, 2025). Cognitive-behavioral coping and mindfulness-based interventions can also mitigate the psychological impact of prolonged exposure to abusive or narcissistic leaders (Harms et al., 2017). On the other hand, if these positive coping strategies are missing or not applied, employees may resort to negative coping strategies (e.g., counterproductive behaviors, social isolation, opposition, sabotage, conflict, avoidance, etc.) (Pradhan et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023; Glover & McClain, 2025).

Studies showed that employees who develop resilience and assertiveness skills are better equipped to resist manipulation and maintain self-efficacy (Frost, 2003). Furthermore, career counseling and mentoring programs could also represent a valuable resource, as they provide psychological safety and guidance for those affected, reducing turnover intentions and learned helplessness (Lopes et al., 2025; Hassanein et al., 2025).

Leadership style can be refined and educated in order to overcome toxic behaviors and expressions. During education or rehabilitation programs, self-awareness training helps potential leaders to recognize and regulate their own “dark side” tendencies, a process often referred to as “shadow work” in regular psychodynamic approaches (Kets de Vries, 2006).

5.2. Group Level – Collective Interventions

At the group-team level, toxic dynamics often emerge through collusion, silence, or passive conformity (Kellerman, 2004). Interventions at this level focus on collective empowerment, psychological safety, and ethical communication.

Team coaching and conflict mediation can reduce the spread of destructive influence and promote open dialogue. Building collective resilience, defined as a team's capacity to recover and maintain functionality in adversity, has proved to buffer the impact of toxic leadership (Lee et al., 2024).

Peer-led interventions, such as reflective groups or ethical dilemma discussions, strengthen employees' ability to recognize and name toxic behaviors early (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Encouraging "speaking-up cultures" and horizontal feedback mechanisms is essential to prevent normalization of abuse and to reinforce shared accountability (Schein, 2010).

5.3. Organizational Level – Systemic Strategies

Addressing toxic leadership at the organizational level requires structural and cultural approaches. Previous studies suggest implementing transparent selection and evaluation systems, ethics-oriented leadership development, and organizational justice mechanisms (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Brown & Treviño, 2006).

At the organizational level, interventions are seen as necessary in all sectors, from integrating ethical leadership frameworks into recruitment, promotion, and appraisal processes, to assessing not only performance outcomes but also relational and moral competencies (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Einarsen et al., 2007). Among usual practices for countering toxic manifestations, several can be stated: clear communication regulations, clear procedures that ensure fairness, regular organizational climate checks, workload management policy, etc. (Labrague, 2024).

At an organization's culture level, fostering psychological safety, trust, ethical and servant leadership models can help create environments resistant to toxic influence. Schein (2010) emphasizes that leadership and culture are "two sides of the same coin": transforming toxic leadership requires reshaping the underlying cultural assumptions that tolerate fear, silence, or blind obedience.

At a macro-societal level, public institutions, universities, and professional associations play a crucial role in codifying ethical standards and promoting leadership literacy - a collective awareness of healthy versus toxic leadership patterns (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla et al., 2007). In this view, leadership education starts from an early age, involving all stakeholders to be aware, engaged, and part of the process.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Leadership remains a core topic for the social sciences, shaping how individuals act and develop, how groups interact, how organizations function and evolve. Yet, while extensive research has explored the positive outcomes of leadership (such as transformational, charismatic or ethical models), the dysfunctional forms have received comparatively limited attention. The phenomenon of toxic leadership, in particular, reveals how authority can be exercised in ways that harm employees and organizations alike, generating stress, conflict, and organizational decline. Studying toxic leadership is therefore essential to understanding the negative dynamics of power, control, and influence within modern workplaces. The article's theoretical analysis approach focuses on a synthesized conceptualization overview, major typologies, highlighting several consequences and coping strategies of toxic leadership. In addition, the Toxic Triangle Model presentation emphasizes the systemic nature of this specific leadership style,

where interactions between the leader's destructive features, followers' vulnerabilities, and the permissive organizational context, create a complex and problematic setting, complicating prevention and intervention strategies. Thus, toxic leadership should be understood not only as an individual pathology, but also as a relational and organizational pathology, frequently exacerbated by internal organizational contexts, conduct, rules and culture. As previously explained, the outcomes in this case manifest at multiple levels (individual, group, and organizational), with direct implications on well-being, performance, group cohesion, and organizational health, among a few examples. Furthermore, the importance of multiple-layer interventions is reiterated, aiming at self-regulation and collective resilience, alongside cultural and institutional transformation. Despite the fact that the Toxic Triangle Model provides a strong conceptual foundation, more empirical studies on contextual factors (e.g. hybrid work, digital environments, diverse cultural norms etc.) can refine the explanations and implications of destructive behaviors associated with leadership at work. In this particular case, longitudinal and cross-cultural designs may explore and outline more elements such as toxic dynamics, follower perception and behavior, organizational climate, and culture in relation to pattern normalization or disruption. Future research efforts should consider multi-level and interdisciplinary views by integrating new domains and advances in study partnership, corroborating social sciences and beyond.

Another implication for future research may address intervention strategies evaluation more, where existing evidence highlights coping responses at individual, group, and organizational levels, with fewer assessments on effectiveness or conditions. By testing multi-level intervention models, exploring ethical infrastructure and accountability systems roles, observing how collective resilience and psychological safety are built in practice, new theoretical models can be developed or updated, as well as support strategies, based on evidence and specific cases. Addressing toxic leadership, the mechanisms behind it and its available coping strategies, raising awareness for research and practice alike, a better understanding can be reached, opening the door for new insights and studies on a subject that has yet to reveal a lot, but which in turn represents a major contemporary challenge towards health at the workplace, ethical and sustainable organizational environments.

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