

2015

# An Exploration of Human Resource Personnel and Toxic Leadership

Sabrina Michele Maxwell

*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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2015

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by

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MA, Pepperdine University, 2006

MA, BIOLA University, 2003

BS, BIOLA University, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

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## Abstract

Toxic leaders are destructive of morale, productivity, and organizational effectiveness. Literature has reported the perspectives of followers, and sometimes how organizations address those toxic behaviors, but research has not examined the perspectives of human resource (HR) managers who must detect the existence of toxic behaviors and handle with the consequences of them. In order to address that gap, the purpose of this study was to determine how HR managers handle the destructive effects of toxic leaders. Schmidt's definition of toxic leadership guided this phenomenological study about the lived experiences of HR managers involving the presence of a toxic leader. The goal of this study was to discover the processes used by HR personnel to identify and manage the conflict created by the behavior of the toxic leader. With this knowledge HR may be more effective and toxicity may be managed at an earlier stage. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 9 HR managers who reported some experience with a toxic leader and who belonged to the Professionals in Human Resource Association. The results identified a process commonly used by HR for managing conflicts created by a toxic leader, and revealed a negative impact of managing the conflict on the HR managers themselves. Positive social change may occur within organizations by applying the process outlined in this study for identifying and reducing the negative effects of toxic leaders before significant damage to people and organizations can occur.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my three children, Michael, Sean, and Tamahra, without whom life would not have its true meaning of love and leadership. As a single mother of these three amazing individuals, the experiences of life, trials, and successes opened up an avenue of knowledge and understanding we have experienced, which led me to this study. These life trials have brought us close in family, close to God, and successful through the adventures of learning. My love, compassion, and admiration go out to these three, who without the love of the Lord would not be the complete individuals they are today. Life is a journey, as the saying goes, but it is not one that should ever be traveled alone. As God is our savior, so family is our support.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Current literature has included a significant amount of discussion on the subordinate's opinion of the bully, the narcissist, and the abusive supervisor. The literature did not provide sufficient information on the human resource personnel's perception of working with the toxic leader. The literature also lacked information on processes the human resources managers who work through conflict created within a company by this leadership style have used. This study entails a discussion on the topic of toxic leadership, a definition of the leadership style, and the perspective of the human resource personnel on working with the toxic leader within organizational dynamics. An examination of processes currently used within industries to resolve conflict created by the toxic leader is included within this study.

### **Background of the Study**

Leadership as a skill comes in various forms and develops based on education, experience, and stages of life. Most people experience both good and poor leaders within their lifetime. Kellerman (2004) states that good leadership will leave a person feeling supported, stable, and motivated. Bad leadership can lead to feelings of rejection, confusion, and can destroy a team atmosphere. Leadership development creates team motivation, supports team atmosphere, provides direction, and carries forward the organizational purpose.

Clinton (1988) listed four stages of development in leadership: (a) the challenges of potential leadership, (b) the skills and gifts to enhance the leader's effectiveness, (c) relating to people in ways that motivate, and (d) principles of leadership. Bennis (2003)

mapped the terrain of leadership with specific steps of innovation, motivation, development, focus, and structure. The security of good leadership is trust, acceptance, and feelings of safety (Bennis, 2003). Bad leadership defies these four stages and the skills that are necessary for productive leadership by creating issues of confusion, insecurity, poor to no direction, and limited support for the team and team members, thus creating chaos and an unsafe, toxic atmosphere.

The term *toxic leader* refers to leaders who display five specific characteristics. Schmidt (2008) labeled toxic leadership as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (p. 57). The term *toxic leadership* often refers to leaders who bully employees, treat them with abuse, act in an irresponsible manner, and are poor communicators (Tepper, 2010). Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011) showed there was a financial loss for companies when toxic leadership was evident. Lipman-Blumen (2005) argued that toxic leaders “first charm but then manipulate, mistreat, undermine, and ultimately leave their followers worse off than when they found them” (p. 3). Toxicity creates conflict and can complicate the business environment by causing emotional damage to those who work for the toxic leader (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008). Although researchers have identified toxic leadership from the position of the subordinate, there is a gap in the literature regarding the human resource personnel’s viewpoint of the toxic leader. There is also limited information where human resource managers discussed their experiences and involvement with the toxic leader. In this dissertation, I connect new knowledge from the perspective of human resource

managers on their experiences with the toxic leader as well as offer a description of processes currently in place for resolving conflict during the toxic leader's tenure.

An atmosphere of toxicity may result from leaders with neurotic personalities (Freud, 1989). Certain traits are inborn within the psyche of some people that naturally create a personality with social neurosis (Freud, 1989), which can create an environment of anxiety. Some of these persons are born with a natural tendency toward narcissism, authoritarian and abusive behaviors, attitudes of self-promotion, and are unpredictable. "Similarly, it is more probable that man is born with a specifically human mode of behavior... Integral to this characteristic behavior is his psychic phenomenology" (Jung, 1959, p. 99). The toxic leader does not consider his or her behavior as negative, but deems actions as normal and acceptable for societal interaction. He or she may not realize or understand why others consider his or her actions to be toxic. It may be who those leaders are as human beings, but their harmful behaviors should not be allowed to continue when they negatively affect others in the workplace. Toxic leaders must be held accountable for their actions, just as other employees are. This study offered the opportunity to discover a mediating relationship with the toxic leader and examined the processes used to reduce the negative impact of their actions on an organization.

This study lead to discovering that human resource personnel did not openly discuss the toxic leadership phenomenon. Human resource managers acknowledge there are difficulties with toxic leaders (Goldman, 2006), but few researchers have presented the human resource manager's perspective on why the toxic leaders are hired or how to

deal with them. This study has provided additional knowledge about the process for identifying the toxic leader and resolving the conflict.

### **Problem Statement**

Human resource personnel are required to handle the discipline of poor performing employees within organizations. Senior management may hire a toxic leader with the intent to increase productivity and ultimately force productive results within a team. Once a toxic leader is hired, and the required level of productivity is reached, negative results typically follow (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Tepper, 2010). Those results are as follows: (a) rebellion in the workplace, (b) employee termination, (c) lost tacit knowledge, (d) eventually lower productivity, and (e) higher cost to motivate employees (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003). Therefore, there is value in collecting knowledge to understand how organizations identify and manage a toxic leader. Toxic leaders are destructive of morale, productivity, and organizational effectiveness. The problem in the current study was the lack of understanding of how organizations address these destructive effects.

The perspective of the human resource managers who must address the toxic environments did not appear in the available literature. Thus, this study provided human resource personnel a chance to express their experiences dealing with toxic leaders, and they were able to discuss what it takes to work through the interpersonally dysfunctional situations that arise during the toxic leader's reign.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe lived experiences of human resource managers regarding identifying and managing a toxic leader and to discover how human resource managers handled the ensuing consequences. New information within this study is provided regarding what methods work when addressing the toxic leadership style. The objective was to close the gap in knowledge regarding how human resource managers mitigate the effects of toxic leaders. Through the interview process, I was able to collect information about their lived experiences. My goal is to promote positive social change within organizations by helping others minimize the negative effects of toxic leaders on their subordinates and companies.

### **Research Questions**

Current researchers primarily focused on the experiences that subordinates had with their toxic leaders (Bond, 2010; Cangemi, 2009; Crocker, 2005; Goldman, 2002, 2006, 2008). However, I found little research regarding lived experiences of the human resource personnel who managed the consequences of a toxic leader. The research questions posed for this study were as follows:

1. What processes and methods do human resource managers use to identify toxic leaders?
2. What processes and methods do human resource managers use to manage toxic leaders?
3. How do human resource managers handle the ensuing consequences?

## **Conceptual Framework**

Organizations require productive work environments as a foundation for harmony in the workplace. When there is conflict within the workplace, organizations should have methods for resolving the conflict. The product of mediating any residual conflict restores peace. Senior managers and human resource personnel need methods to intervene and overcome the toxicity that may arise when a toxic leader is hired. The toxic leader destroys peace, creates conflict, and precludes chaos by antagonizing the subordinate through their toxic behavior. “...predominantly survey-based research suggests that the prevalence of self-reported bullying is between 10% and 35% within the workforce...” (Harrington, Warren & Rayner, 2013). With this framework in mind, I set out to understand the organizational perspective of this dilemma. In order to begin to gather this knowledge, I believed an interview human resource personnel would be most effective. This knowledge may lead to understanding the consequences that occur within organizations from this negative leadership style by sharing the perspective of the human resource manager.

Kellerman (2008), Lipman-Blueman (2004), and Pellitier (2010) completed interviews to collect the followers’ or subordinates’ perspectives of working with a toxic leader. These authors provided the position of the subordinate, the negative effects of the toxic leader on their performance, and conflict caused within an organization by the toxic leader. The literature showed that the organizational climate is generally not supportive when working under a toxic leader (Cocker, 2005), and that “employees generally interact with leaders who model behaviors they deem appropriate” (Gelfand, Leslie,

Keller, & de Dreu, 2012, p. 1132). Supportive culture within the workplace enhances team workmanship and unity. However, the destructive behaviors of the toxic leader affect the workplace by destroying harmony. “Schein (1983) was among the first to argue that the personality of the leader affects the development of organizational culture” (as cited in Gel and, et al., 2012, p. 1134). Organizations identify management processes for collaboration and cooperation by the standards of behavior they accept from their leaders.

Impairment caused by the environment of the toxic leader does negatively affect productivity, as discovered by Martinko, Sikora, and Harvey (2012). Franke and Felfe (2011) discovered that predictors of motivation derived from “specific relations for the different leadership dimensions with perceived strain and idealized influence” (p. 306). According to some researchers, dominative conflict cultures reflect open and heated debates, direct confrontations, and organizational disagreements (as cited in Gelfand, et al., 2012, p. 1133). The subordinate who perceives his or her superior as toxic, abusive, authoritative, or narcissistic will react negatively due to his or her perceived emotional and physical stress within the work environment.

By completing this study, I discovered how to better understand the organizational side of toxic leadership through the views of the human resource manager. Employees only adapt the culture of handling conflict within the organization when they observe “normative behaviors for handling conflict [which] may include active listening to the opinions of all parties involved” (Gelfand et al, 2012, p. 1133). This knowledge may provide conflict cultures an opportunity to address the toxicity in the organization with positive reinforcement for change.

Toxic leadership and behaviors demonstrated by this leadership style have been a part of human history since the dawn of the working organization (Vecchio, 1997). This style of leadership has been discussed within literature from the position of the subordinate, also defined as the follower. “A study on workplace bullying by Zapf and others (2003) found that around 5% to 10% of employees experience bullying at least once on the job” (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). The study I have completed is the first study to document issues with toxicity from the human resource manager’s position. Significant studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have been performed to show the negative effects a toxic leader can have on a team, an individual, and an organization. Schyns and Hansbroughn (2010) determined the conflict toxicity creates can complicate the business structure by causing emotional damage to those who work for the toxic leaders.

To determine processes that mediate between subordinates and the toxic leaders, it is necessary to comprehend the dynamics that create toxicity in the workplace. This understanding can be difficult to learn without knowing the perspective of the follower (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011) and the organization. The knowledge available within this study provides additional awareness from the human resource manager’s perspective. A human resource manager is required to interact with the follower and the organization to better understand the perspective of the team, the employee, and the company. The human resource manager must be able to communicate the needs of the company and work with an employee to ensure the duties of resolution are performed (Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009). Senior leaders must also understand they will need to work in

conjunction with the human resource department to obtain and maintain control over toxic leaders. Managing the toxic leaders, and negative consequences brought on by this leadership style, is a group effort that includes senior management, human resources, and the toxic leader.

The framework of this study included the use of information gathered from current literature regarding the complaints, concerns, and collected data of the subordinate. This information from the literature was used to create the interview questions in Appendix C and was used to determine a qualitative study appropriate for gathering the perspective of human resource personnel. The completed study identified actions used by human resource personnel to resolve work-related issues generated by a toxic leader's behavior. These generated ideas should be supplied to human resource personnel and senior management so the organization may move toward functioning as a healthier company even while the toxic leader remains employed by the company.

Through the stories and experiences of human resource managers who have worked with the toxic leader, information was collected about what is known and what is not known in relation to processes of intervention when resolving conflict created by the toxic leader. Prior researchers had not yet grasped the personal experience of human resource practitioners dealing with this phenomenon, nor was there an understanding of the processes used to resolve organizational issues resulting from the phenomenon of toxic leadership. Identifying action and structures that can mitigate the effect of toxic leadership and employee relationship issues from the human resource manager's position may assist with a better understanding of how to handle the ensuing consequences of the

toxic leader. The situational examples provided through the human resource manager's stories helped to understand why toxic leaders are difficult to work for and indicated how their behavior affects human resource personnel in resolving difficulties with these problem leaders. Identifying and supporting intervention processes that work, and understanding what processes do not work, may ultimately provide new knowledge on how the negative impact of a toxic leader can be reduced.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study was qualitative, using face-to-face interviews with human resource personnel on the subject of toxic leadership. The interviews were exploratory in nature to draw out thoughts, beliefs, concepts, and concerns of the human resource personnel regarding how to minimize damage from toxic leaders. The phenomenological approach was completed with nine human resource managers who had direct experience with a toxic leader and who had observed or been involved with the negative consequences in their workplaces. Once the interviews were completed, the data were gathered and coded into various shared experiences to create themes. The sampling labels represent the ideas brought to fruition by the interviewees. Domain and taxonomic coding (Saldana, 2009) was completed in order to conclude the phenomenological study. Accessing the participants' lived experiences and professional responsibilities in detection of the toxicity in the workplace are a part of the coded themes. Saldana's (2009) terminology of first cycle coding and second cycle coding was used to identify themes in the data. Data were analyzed to discover the specific hierarchy of terms, categories, and labels used by the participants. Collating and documenting the information was useful for discussing a

possible process for addressing the conflict. This knowledge may provide a process to organizations to determine and resolve the impact of the experiences from the human resource manager's position, then define how best to approach and resolve conflict created by the toxic leaders.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Follower:* A subordinate or any employee who reports to a manager (Kellerman, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2004, 2005).

*Human resource department:* The department is created to assure the laws of any state regarding employment are upheld. According to Wright, McMahan, and McWilliams (2006), "they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable" (p. 301). The human resource department is created for the purpose of protecting the organization by assuring the rules, laws, and state hiring requirements are followed to the letter, and under the guise of legal requirements. Human resource personnel are specifically trained in all aspects of state and federal requirements, and assist the company in compliance with these requirements (pihra.org).

*Human resource management, personnel, and managers:* The formal structure within an organization responsible for all the decisions, strategies, factors, principles, operations, practices, functions, activities and methods related to the management of people (shrm.org, 2013).

*Leadership:* The actions of any person who guides a team of subordinates in directing their work, instructing process and procedure provided thorough organizational

support, and providing accountability within the organization for final product or service produced by an organization (Vecchio, 1997).

*Senior management:* The final decision maker for any organizational structure, function, product, or economic decision (Blau & Duncan, 1967).

*Toxic leadership:* The leader who displays specific negative behaviors of abusive, authoritarian, narcissistic, self-promoting, and unpredictable conduct (Schmidt, 2008).

### **Assumptions, Scope, Delimitations, and Limitations**

#### **Assumptions**

I assumed that those human resource persons who volunteered for the study had experience and would be able to articulate that experience with at least one toxic leader. Confirmation of their interaction with a toxic leader was established at the onset of the discussion. It was assumed those human resource managers that I interviewed would testify regarding processes their company used to manage the conflict and the toxic leader. It was assumed the human resource managers who participated in this study would be willing and able to communicate their experiences. The human resource personnel interviewed were able to tell their stories in a manner that offered suggestions, assistance, or demonstrated a method that could be standardized for managing the toxic leader. As the nature of the study was the interaction of senior management, human resource personnel, subordinates, and a toxic leader, I believed there may be a significant effect of new information to narrow the gap in knowledge and/or processes to address the relationship between the groups.

## Scope of the Study

The original scope of the study was to interview 20 human resource managers from various industries, and understand the specific effects toxic leadership has on the subordinate, the human resource personnel, senior management, and the organization as a whole. Nine managers ultimately participated in this study completion of the study. The explanation for the variance was due to the human resource manager's concern about commitment to their respective organizations and comfort with discussing the subject of a potential conflict with a toxic leader or a past suit that occurred from the experience. Further information with regard to differences between the proposed and actual number of participants appears in Chapter 4.

The common denominator of the group was their membership in the Professional Institute of Human Resources Association (PIHRA). The definition for the toxic leader used in this research encompasses the five characteristics identified by Schmidt (2008) as "narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision" (p. 57). The scope of research included gathering the data by interviewing current human resource personnel to establish frequent concerns and issues they dealt with when attempting to resolve situations with toxic leaders within an organization. The data included recorded conversations with human resource personnel, coded narrative linking common viewpoints. The interpreted data identified themes that emerged related to the identification of toxic leaders and handling the consequences of their behavior. I also investigated what human resource personnel had done to manage

toxic situations through analyzing their stories, experiences, and the problems they encountered.

### **Delimitations**

Establishing the limits of the study included focusing solely on what is considered toxic leadership, and not focusing on other forms of ineffective or difficult leadership. Names of companies and the research participants as well as dates of the reported experiences were not included in order to protect the trust and confidence of those interviewed. Any digressions to experiences of outstanding leadership, positive actions taken by good leadership, and stories not related to toxic leaders were not relevant thus not included in the focus of this study. Although leaders can learn from good experiences, the purpose of this study was to understand the human resource managers' perspectives on toxic leadership. The focus must be on toxic situations or resolutions related to this subject.

### **Limitations**

The gap in knowledge regarding human resource managers' perspectives and the toxic leader was itself a limitation. Supportive literature was available from followers' stories, authors' interpretations, and research on what knowledge was currently available. Another limitation was that only the viewpoint of human resource managers and not the people who hired these toxic leaders was presented. The presentation, then, was the human resource managers' perceptions of reality. Few and limited literature studies on this subject could be found. The shared experiences of the human resource personnel may

serve as a ground-breaking construct to learning key steps toward handling conflict and managing the toxic chaos created by negative leadership of this nature.

Limitations included preconceived ideas regarding toxicity and the definition of the toxic leader. Limitations included assuring sufficient human resource personnel were willing and able to volunteer to be interviewed due to their concerns over confidentiality, trustworthiness, and security. It was important to confirm trustworthiness in order to gain, affirm, and retain trust of the interviewees. There were issues of time and distance, but not issues of representation by a wide industry. The interview process did not require additional interview sessions because there was enough variety in representation from multiple industries. Limitations also included the inability to specifically interview the toxic leader who displays all five behaviors used to define toxic leadership. Therefore, all data derived from observers of toxic leadership consequences. This study represents the beginning of newly found information on human resource process and procedure, which may open the door to further studies of this type.

### **Significance and Social Change**

The knowledge gained by understanding toxic leadership and methods for dealing with the situations created by the toxic leader could help other organizations learn how to control the damage done by toxic leaders. It may also provide human resource personnel with a voice in defining, understanding, and mediating consequences brought upon by toxic leaders. Finally, it may provide better understanding of the lived experience of human resources personnel in coming to terms with the presence of toxic leaders and the consequences of their actions. Positive social change may result by reducing the

employee exposure to toxic leaders in the workplace by intervening earlier and more effectively in cases where toxic leaders are present.

### **Summary**

This research is an effort to determine how human resources professionals handle the consequences of working with toxic leaders. The knowledge gained by this research helped narrow the gap in literature in understanding how organizations manage the consequences of toxic leadership. Chapter 2 provides a review of the current literature on toxic leadership and subordinates' difficulties in working within a toxic work environment and how this creates interpersonal issues. Chapter 3 covers the methodology of the study. Chapters 4 and 5 complete the data analysis and recommendations for future studies of this subject matter.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Leaders in management circles have been discussing abusive, authoritarian, and narcissistic leadership styles since the early 1970s (Duncan, 2003). Although the terms *authoritative and abusive leadership* have existed since the early 1970s (Hogan & Smither, 2001), discussions of negative leadership styles have led to toxic leadership becoming a categorical phenomenon (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003; Hogan, 2007; Kellerman, 2004, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Schmidt (2008) labeled toxic leadership as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (p. 57). For the purposes of this research, the toxic leader must display all five of these behavioral attributes in order to meet the criteria labeled as the toxic leader.

While there has been a consensus that toxic leaders are bad for organizations and destructive of good relationships in the workplace, there have been occasions when toxic leaders were hired because of their industry knowledge with the intent to repair an ineffective team or inoperative noncompliant culture. “According to the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), when employers do not fulfill their promises and obligations, the employee reciprocates by altering his or her contributions to the organization (e.g. by reducing their efforts and performance)” (Bal, Chiaburu & Jansen, 2010). A toxic leader’s short-term success in terminating unproductive or difficult followers is one motivation for senior teams to knowingly hire them. Schyns and Hansbroughn (2010) observed that senior management would hire a toxic leader because past positions of employment demonstrate short-term success in progressing teams and

organizations to higher productivity. Once the toxic leader has reached a high performance level, the actual symptoms of a destructive culture begin to appear. The classic case of this behavior was Dunlap (1997), whose success upon initial appointment rapidly declined, leaving chaos in his wake. Dunlap received a judgment “permanently barring [him]...from serving as officers or directors of any public company” (Securities and Exchange Commission, n.d.). His self-destructive manners included the unpredictability, narcissistic, abusive, self-promoting, and authoritarian behavior of the toxic leader.

The success of the toxic leader often becomes a problem for human resources managers to resolve when conflicts arise due to persistent toxicity within an organization. Human resource personnel are able to identify toxic leaders from multiple perspectives and may even express apprehension when senior management considers hiring one (Boddy, 2014; Meyer & Casile, 2010). Human resource managers confronting the consequences of toxic leadership must identify (a) manageable methods of intervention in light of the consequences of the additional conflict within the workplace, (b) worker’s compensation claims and stress management claims that arise, and (c) any potential litigation that may arise from a toxic leader’s behavior. This research explored (a) why and under what circumstances toxic leaders are creating chaos, and (b) how the noxious consequences are managed.

### **Literature Review and Strategy**

The review of literature was conducted by using books and journal articles from PSYCHINFO and Business Source Complete accessed through EBSCO host in the

Walden University online library. Key words used in this literature review were *fear in human behavior, followership and the follower's perspective on bad, poor, or negative leadership, trust in leadership, bullying, psychological contract, authoritarian leadership, abusive leadership, emotional intelligence, the environment of the toxic leader, organizational culture, human resource personnel, toxic behavior, toxic leadership, and toxicity in the workplace*. The literature review is inclusive of a 9-year timeframe from 2005 through 2014. During the exhaustive search for subjects related to toxic leadership, toxic behavior, and toxicity in the workplace, it was discovered that there was insufficient literature available that defined the perspective of the human resource manager or human resource department. This is the gap in literature—a perspective of human resource personnel.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Many theorists have identified, tested, interviewed, and delineated the positions, beliefs, and complaints of subordinates regarding the toxic leadership (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Martinko & Harbey, 2012; Meyer & Casile, 2010). Subordinates who describe their frustrations about the toxic leader are referred to as followers (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Followers conveyed the bullying, narcissistic behaviors, and destructive forces aligned with the toxic leader (Pellitier, 2010; Tepper & Duffy, 2011). There is insufficient information—a gap in the literature—regarding the viewpoint of the human resource personnel who manage the company's toxic circumstances. Organizations need methods to intervene and mediate the conflict created by the toxic leader behavior. In an effort to discover what methods are being used by human resource to resolve toxicity

from the toxic leader, an interview with human resource managers would broaden and support this knowledge. The framework is to gain a viewpoint from the organizational side on the subject of the toxic leader and then consider how the application of mediating methods might assist with resolving issues that appear to negatively affect the followers. By completing a phenomenological study to describe the viewpoint of the human resource personnel, a more thorough understanding of the destruction caused within organizations by the toxic leader could become clear. Interviewing participants who have had to administer decisions regarding behavior by the toxic leader may lead to data that helps reduce the gap in literature.

### **The Construct of Toxic Leadership in the Workplace**

The purpose of this research is to understand the human resource personnel viewpoint on who these toxic leaders are, what defines them, the human resource manager's experiences, and how they handle the toxic consequences. The construct of toxic leadership in the workplace was developed by reviewing and comparing what is currently known about Schmidt's (2008) definition of toxic leaders to new knowledge provided by human resource managers. By comparing the definitions of toxic leadership through the view of various authors, the similarity of behavior became evident. Hogan (2007), Pellitier (2010), Reed (2009), and Schmidt (2008) completed the research on toxic leadership terms referenced in this dissertation and demonstrated that this subject affects all organizations. However, the need to discover the perspective of human resource managers regarding toxic leaders was also apparent.

The construct of understanding the relationship and responsibilities of the human resources department to senior management and how this affects the entire organization contributed to the development of a phenomenological study. Although I used the description of toxic leadership provided by Schmidt (2008), the perspective of human resource personnel may lead to a broader definition of the toxic leader's behavior. Exploring this variation led to a new and deeper definition of the toxic leader. The implication of any change this revealed is discussed in Chapter 4 and 5.

Several other questions arise when expanding upon the research questions regarding the lived experiences of human resource managers who are responsible for working with leaders identified as toxic and methods and processes human resource managers use to identify and resolve issues of conflict with the toxic leader. These questions derived from thorough examination of the literature on followers' comments regarding the difficulty of working with toxic leaders. It was clear through multiple literature articles that toxic leadership is a negative experience for the follower, which is harmful to any organization (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Pellitier, 2010; Tepper, 2010; Yagil & Luria, 2010). Therefore, a closer examination of the lived experiences of the human resource personnel was necessary in order to collect a complete understanding of this subject. Following are some of the questions posed to the human resource personnel that needed to be expanded upon:

1. What other terms, if any, define the toxic leader from the human resource manager's perspective?

2. How do human resource personnel discover toxicity is present in the workplace?
3. How do the human resource personnel handle working with the toxic leader?
4. How are the consequences of a toxic leader managed among employees and the organization?
5. Are there barriers to removal of a toxic leader?

Toxicity in the workplace is created when subordinates and/or teams feel bullied, harassed, or abused. The actions of the toxic leader are identified as creating situations where the subordinates complain about a negative atmosphere working under the leader who suppresses them, abuses them, and is harassing them. This leader may use inappropriate methods of causing the subordinate to believe they are forced into actions and/or procedures that they may not normally perform. The definition used in this dissertation was developed by Schmidt (2008). It was important to use this definition because of the specific actions and behaviors Schmidt (2008) identified as being toxic. Using this definition eliminated mere personality differences or derailed managers from being included. This also eliminated any doubt about the actual toxicity of the leader.

This dissertation provides a definition of toxic leadership, presents a view of toxicity in organizations, and discusses the human resource manager's viewpoint on working with the toxic leader. Three case studies will be included as examples. These examples are provided only to further support the need for understanding some of the issues human resource personnel must deal with in order to resolve conflict, or manage how a department can work with a toxic leader.

## Literature Review

### **Subordinates, Followers, and Followership**

Lipman-Blumen (2004, 2005) wrote several books on the subject of toxic leadership from the perspective of the follower or subordinate. A subordinate is a descriptive term for anyone who officially reports to a superior. Current literature uses the term follower or followership when describing the perspective of the subordinate. The definition of follower or followership used by Lipman-Blumen (2004, 2005) was supported by Kellerman (2008), Pellitier (2010), and Tepper (2011), who also used the term of follower rather than subordinate. The term subordinate can be perceived as derogatory and possesses a negative connotation. In this dissertation, the reference to subordinate is transposable with follower and followership since it is used within the literature.

Lipman-Blumen (2005), Kellerman (2008), Pellitier (2010), and Tepper (2011) used the term follower to better define the depth of connection a leader has to his or her subordinate. The relationship is not merely one of a manager directing a subordinate to complete certain tasks, it is an emotional connection that the follower allows, and the leader must earn. The relationship is one of commitment from the follower to the leader. A leader is only as good as a follower will follow (Cavaiola, 2000). While this is a desirable relationship to build between a leader and subordinate, the toxic leader is unable to successfully establish this bond because of toxic behavior. As a result, of the negative leadership qualities displayed by the toxic leader, the positive emotional connection between leader and follower is not established resulting in a follower who does not

commit to their toxic leader. Consequently, the follower will rebel, either by actions or exiting the company, and/or file a worker's compensation claim against the organization.

### **Aspects of Toxic Leadership**

Schmidt (2008) labeled toxic leadership as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (p. 57). Although some of these behaviors may be displayed in a toxic environment, it is essential that the leader display all five behaviors in order to be classified as a toxic leader for this dissertation. Hogan (2007) revealed through the Hogan Development Survey (Hogan/HDS/asp) the pattern of derailing when senior management hires a leader who later becomes toxic. Hogan specifies the leader or manager who is feeling significant pressure and stress may act in toxic manners and derail their career. Hogan has developed the survey to identify the derailed from a toxic leader.

Harms, Spain, and Hannah (2011) established the dark side of leadership, which also appears when managers perform under pressure and behave as borderline sociopaths creating psychosocial unsafe climates. Harms et al. (2011) provided several points of interest, including the lack of empirical studies on “narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism as the most widely studied subclinical traits” (p. 496). The dark side of personality is another way of describing toxic behaviors in individuals. Understanding those traits may help to identify leaders who tend to practice the behaviors of the authoritarian, the narcissist, and illustrate abusive traits.

Goldman (2008b) defended the use of the term toxic leaders versus abusive or other terms for toxic behavior as applied to organizational development and organizational behavior. As reported by Goldman (2008):

The toxic leader is an insidious and pernicious spreading of negative emotional contagion—a toxic process accelerated by highly destructive and dysfunctional leadership behavior. In a circular fashion, the diffusion of dysfunction perpetuates toxic organizational systems, and high toxicity levels, in turn, create new pockets of dysfunction. (p. 245)

Goldman expressed that toxicity is a social construct that generates social conflict and further discussed the need for a measurement. He specified the levels of toxins and toxic atmospheres might be difficult in parallel with scientists who use formulas and methods of measurement for toxins in environmental situations. The difficulty may be positioned in part by each individual's point of view. Toxicity may feel toxic to one person who is not used to chaos or criticism, whereas another individual may consider the criticism as normal if their childhood surroundings were one of dysfunction. This measurement, if allowed, would be handled through the human resource personnel for presentation to senior management.

### **Authoritarianism and Toxicity**

Authoritarianism is one of the behaviors displayed by the toxic leader and this term is often interchanged with social dominance. Although the leaders displaying social dominance often do not volunteer to be interviewed and questioned about their toxic behavior, Duncan (2003) determined methods of deriving their psychological state.

Duncan suggested using a “content-coding system to measure social dominance (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)” (p. 182) and further described developing an understanding of the styles of “large-scale repressive social movements” (p. 183) as a method of analyzing the authoritarian personality. Duncan looked at the psychological motive for power, affiliation, and intimacy and how authoritarian leaders differ from followers in the levels of these human needs. The difference may be part of what separates authoritarian leaders from leaders who practice emotional intelligence and may be a key concept to understanding the innate behavior of authoritarian leaders who contribute to a toxic work environment. It is possible to be authoritarian and not toxic, however; authoritarian is one of the behaviors that when expressed with the others constitute toxic leadership. The difference is the behavior of unpredictability. Followers can learn how to work around the authoritarian leader while appeasing them in order to cope with few ill effects by anticipating their reaction, thus causing the authoritarian leader to believe they are still in control. The toxic leader is unpredictable, and the follower is unable to predict reactions to positive or negative situations. The authoritarian leader has certain repeatable reactions the follower can anticipate, and will learn what causes those reactions. The toxic leader; however, does not have predictive reactions, and the follower cannot anticipate their change. This creates a toxic anxiety within the workplace.

### **Abusive Behavior and Toxicity**

Toxicity may be seen through different individual perspectives as a negative influence from individuals within organizations. Incivility is used interchangeably with

the term abusive, and considered to be one perspective of negative influence for leaders to display. Crocker (2005) stated that behaviors of incivility resemble behaviors of the toxic leader since they display narcissism, abusiveness, and authoritarian action. Furthermore, he developed hypotheses to define employee perceptions of “interactional injustice, managerial incivility and turnover intentions, withdrawal behaviors, performance behaviors, and negative effects on the organization” (p. 42). Crocker also included a brief discussion of the “human cost approach” (p. 61) of labor replacement and employee support when incivility occurs within the workplace. He noted the relationship within the hypotheses was positively related to managerial incivility.

Incivility will have a negative effect on employee perception that negatively affects an organization. Crocker (2005) further acknowledged that behaviors within cultures are seen as acceptable or unacceptable in accordance with their accepted norm, thus individual employee perception may not be enough to convince senior management there is an issue. Crocker described various studies performed to define and measure petty tyranny, bullying, and abusive supervision, but noted there is insufficient empirical evidence to rely on or validate “managerial incivility” (p. 3). As the definition of toxic leadership includes abusive supervision and employee perceptions of incivility from a leader, other measurements inclusive of abusive leadership may be necessary to fully convince senior management of the issues at hand.

### **Narcissism and Toxicity**

Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011) examined the perception of deep-level differences between subordinates and leaders. The narcissistic leader displays an attitude

of superiority, impatience, and dwells on their image of leadership and ability. The attitude and behavior that accompanies the narcissism may become toxic as a leader is consumed with their accomplishments or successes. Tepper et al. (2011) applied a test to measure and determine the validity of their thesis that unfavorable outcomes arise when a leader perceives an extremely dissimilar trait or personality and moral code from a follower. If the leader displays additional toxic behavior because of getting ahead, he or she would be aligned with the definition of the toxic leader defined in this dissertation by displaying narcissism, which is one of the five behaviors of a toxic leader. This further supports an alignment with actions of incivility and the toxic leaders. The toxic leader may display incivility toward the follower, which may be discussed within the team then reported to the human resource department, thus indicating toxicity and possible follower rebellion or potential turnover intentions.

### **Self-Promoting Action, Communication, and Unpredictability**

The narcissist leader will self-promote him or herself to rise above everyone else and attempt to take all the credit for successes and place the blame on others for his failures. The toxic leader displays to senior management behaviors that self-promote thus causing senior management to believe the toxic leader has the necessary skill set to manage the team. Self-promotion alone is not toxic. It is only toxic as a behavior when combined with the other four behaviors of the toxic leader. It is also toxic when the actions represented are destructive to continuity of the team, team goals, and coworkers. The action of self-promotion becomes toxic when accompanied with subversive acts toward others, along with the other specific behaviors that are considered toxic in the

work environment. Illies and Reiter-Palmon (2008) determined that “harming organizational members or striving for short-term gains over long-term organizational goals leads to focusing on sustained destructive acts with profound implications rather than minor slip-ups” (p. 24). Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011) described “annual losses of an estimated \$23.8 billion in increased health care costs, workplace withdrawal, and lost productivity” (p. 279) due to the consequences of followers’ perceptions of toxic leadership. The member of a team depends on the team leader to develop company goals, positively motivate the team, and have sufficient knowledge and business sense to make good decisions, and provide guidance and purpose. Through self-promotion, the actions of the leader harm the team as a whole by destroying motivation and inducing feelings of fear, anxiety, stress, and rebellion among the followers.

### **Toxicity and the Organization**

Many theorists have noted hiring a toxic leader negatively affects followers (Ashforth, 1994; Kellerman, 2005, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2004, 2005; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Tepper, 2003, 2007). Discovering how hiring a toxic leader affects a department, team, and organization is a very important part of this dissertation. Uncovering how human resource managers handle toxic situations and how information from both the followers and the senior team leader is managed uncovers the unknown information that influences senior management and uncovers who toxic leaders are, while understanding how the behavior of this negative leader affects an organization. Schyns and Hansbroughn (2010) stated that the cognitive “process employed by the leader play a large role in how he or she gathers information, interprets it, and makes decisions toward

a course of action” (p. 23). Schyns and Hansbroughn discovered the importance of understanding destructive leadership through the multiple studies employed. Toxicity is an organizational disease that can destroy cohesion, as discovered by these authors. The conflict toxicity can create can complicate the business structure by causing emotional damage to those who work for toxic leaders.

### Toxic Environments

Some organizational leaders choose toxic leaders, seem willing to tolerate the inefficiencies, human toll, and other costs related to the toxic behavior, and are slow to respond to mounting evidence of its ineffectiveness before it reaches crisis proportions. Lipman-Blumen (2005) addressed these phenomena by noting, “Organizations qua organizations can yield their own toxins. They do so through detrimental policies and practices—including setting unreasonable performance goals, promoting excessive internal competition, and creating a culture of blame” (p. 17). Corporate leaders on the senior team are frequently given goals by stockholders or owners that fulfill personal dreams and visions while exploiting or making excessive performance demands on employees. The environment will evolve from what appears to the follower to be an organized routine of day-to-day duties and responsibilities to one of sudden chaos and change. The follower anticipates this as a familiar schedule, when it becomes a day of conflict, uncertainty, and unpredictability.

Bal, Chiaburu, and Jansen (2010) discussed authoritarianism management and the effects this behavior has on rebellion by the follower. Bond, Tuckey, and Dollard (2010) discussed workplace bullying and the personal stress related to this action. The behaviors

of authoritarianism, bullying, and the personal stress these behaviors cause a follower to feel are related to actions toxic leaders display. All of these actions push the follower toward defensive reactions and conflict within the team. These warning signs described findings that forewarn the leader of any company that toxicity is on the rise.

The literature includes articles on negative leadership styles and how the perception of bad leadership will harm organizations. Baker (2007) believed that followers no longer hold a passive role, and leaders are people with a role to fill rather than inherent personality “specifically graced” (p. 55) upon them. Cangemi and Pfohl (2009) described seven conditions of actual events occurring under the reign of a sociopathic leader, the chameleon-type personality, verbally aggressive, and got-to-be-right attitude. Bond et al. (2010) discussed how bullies react to the competition and the internal stress factors, and how they generate a work environment that creates such behavior. Bond et al. provided insight referencing narcissism, bullying, abusive, and authoritative behaviors of which all assist with the understanding of toxic behavior. The relationship between these articles further supports (a) toxicity is a real issue within workplace atmosphere, (b) toxicity is recognized by these behaviors, and (c) although the behavior is recognized there is limited discussion regarding human resource personnel’s process or perspective regarding the management of a toxic leader.

### **Recognizing and Managing the Warning Signs**

The costs of litigation, decline of employee morale and decreased motivation are negatively affecting organizations (Hogan, 2007). Categories of failure included being reactive instead of proactive, being unable to cope with coordinating actions with

relationships, failing to provide good leadership, being overly emotional, and having an “overriding personality defect” (Hogan, 2007, p. 113). Workplace climates, which feel unsafe to the follower and end in litigation or a worker’s compensation claim may cost the company significant dollars toward protecting the organization’s name, but may not necessarily rid the organization of the cause of a toxic situation, or ongoing conflict.

According to Bond et al. (2010):

The symptoms are: work-related harassment, job demands, meaningless tasks, professional humiliation, belittlement, intimidation, and isolation. These work symptoms are reflected in employee posttraumatic stress by a) intrusions, flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, b) avoidance of people, places, objects, and thoughts associated with the traumatic event; and c) physiological and psychological hyper-arousal. (p. 39)

Encouraging workers to talk through these concerns, involving them in decision-making processes, and realigning a strong healthy commitment to the organization is a first step toward eliminating the toxic mentality and behavior, and usually should be processed through the human resource department. If an issue arises within a company the human resource department is expected to resolve the issue prior to it becoming a serious conflict. This study provides a process for resolution to these concerns.

Corporate leaders, who realize the effects of the problem are creating organizational climates that support, acknowledge, illustrate emotional intelligence, and promote healthy physical and psychological safety (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003). An

organizational goal should be to strive for climates of positive reinforcement that motivate workers toward a healthy leader–follower relationship.

### **Barriers to Removal of the Toxic Leader**

Although formulas are available to recognize narcissism as well as authoritarian, abusive, self-promoting, and unpredictable behavior, it is difficult to convince the upper echelon leaders to accept the existence of a toxic situation without these measurements. Goldman (2008) noted senior management will often not act on toxicity due to fear of litigation, wrongful termination claims, or other allegations until it is too late and followers have left a company, a worker's compensation case is filed, or a lawsuit ensues. Goldman (2008b) noted, "Although there are individuals who may be labeled as dysfunctional, this only constitutes a subset of larger, systemic issues" (p. 245). Goldman noted that after organizational leaders accept the existence of an issue of concern, the leaders would treat the solution as a patient-doctor relationship by hiring an outside person to identify the cause of the illness or toxin and recommend a repair to reverse the effects.

Today's employment is considered to be *at will*, meaning termination may occur at any time, by either party. The case studies discussed clearly show the organization must have clear indication they have worked with the toxic leader to establish the termination is due to a negative effect on productivity. Human resource personnel must document all activity and maintain clear records of the occurrences in order to support the organization in the event any court case might arise.

### **Perspective of the Follower**

Followers have identified toxic leader behavior through multiple questionnaires that have been conducted within the field of management and leadership. The follower's perspective may partially influence what eventually becomes toxic leadership, but organizational effectiveness can be notably affected by a follower's negative perception. That is, the followers will abandon an organization due to their perceived belief in the existence of abusive or toxic supervision (Martinko, Sikora, & Harvey, 2012). The followers may revolt within an organization, or an organization may fail both financially and ethically if the power of the toxic leaders is not controlled. "Toxic leadership situations leading to destructive outcomes leave the organization worse off relative to its rivals" (p. 52). One follower's perspective of toxic behavior may not be the same as another's, and individuals may define fear and toxic behavior differently. Individuals may relate to or have experienced toxic leaders as abusive fathers and mothers, authoritarian bullying parents, or narcissistic teachers. Discovering the perspective of the follower is helpful to the human resource department, but without the support of senior management in controlling the toxic leader, the knowledge would not be used.

### **Perspective of Senior Management**

Senior management must acknowledge the information human resource managers are providing regarding negative affects the toxic leader is having on the organization, and when the toxic behavior is creating resentment and conflict in the workplace. Mossholder, Richardson, and Settoon (2011) completed research on creating value in organizations by having human resource personnel create systems through the human

resource department to promote relational climates. “Human resource systems influence organizational performance by eliciting and controlling employee behaviors” (Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011, p. 33, as cited in Schuler & River, 1989). By developing more integrated and knowledgeable team atmospheres, and supporting a more ethical atmosphere for the follower “Human resource systems affected employee perceptions of a concern-for-employee climate” (Mossholder et al., 2011, p. 34). Kellerman (2004) supported the value of managing toxicity by noting, “Unethical leadership fails to distinguish between right and wrong because common codes of decency and good conduct are in some way violated, the leadership process is defiled” (p. 34). Through fully developing parameters for measuring toxicity, organizational leaders will be able to monitor and set limits on the degree of toxicity tolerated within a company. Thus, monitoring and decreasing toxicity will serve as a positive benefit toward organizational ends.

Legal and moral decisions to follow the rules, support a company, and perform a work task within legal limits are an individual’s choice, but can be affected by the individual’s stress level. This in turn affects the overall productivity and success of the organization. The stress level will play a role in influencing the overall morality of the leader, manager, and follower (Seek & Parzefall, 2008). They all must make a moral decision regarding how they will behave during times of high stress. Human nature sometime reacts unreasonably when stress factors interfere with the leader’s role. The toxic leader may not necessarily be aware of the team stress or be open to discussing

team stress yet their decision-making affects the overall productivity of the team and organization.

It is equally as important to realize that the ethics of leaders and followers may also be affected by the stress levels of various individuals. According to Selart and Johansen (2010), “Given the detrimental consequences of unsound ethical decisions, understanding how leaders make ethical decisions and the factors that influence ethical decision making and ethical decisions become critical” (pp. 129-130). Selart and Johansen studied the effects of stress for leaders and managers when company demands become overwhelming. When conflicting roles, time demands, and multiple directions are given, leaders and managers will experience toxic stress and therefore act in an unethical manner. Negative actions performed under stress by individuals will cause people to execute behavior, which is not typical of their nature or persona. Selart and Johansen (2010) noted, “Stress is a relational concept in that it constitutes the relationship between a set of external stressors and the individual’s ability to cope... [Stressors] create feelings of “powerlessness, work overload, a lack of feedback and punishment” (Selart & Johansen, 2010, p. 131). This may lead to a pattern of unethical behavior, which may contribute to toxic behavior, a temporary experience with the dark side of personality, and career derailment.

Selart and Johansen (2010) completed a study to recognize the perception of negative stress, ethical issues, stress outcome, and demographics on managers. The study produced evidence that a lack of feedback from senior management created additional stress, which in turn caused some leaders to believe unethical behavior was their right to

compensate themselves for such disappointments. In some instances, stress leads to thoughts of “if the company abandons me it is all right to abandon the company” (Selart & Johansen, 2010, p. 136). According to Selart and Johansen, perceived stressful situations measured positive on leaders’ and managers’ behavior toward unethical decisions. Frustration over poor teamwork related to stressful workload was also measured positively toward leaders’ and managers’ behavior of an unethical nature. The common denominator in the perception of stress and perception of acceptable ethical or unethical behavior was highly correlated to positive feedback, communication from senior management, the upper echelon, and the capacity for self-regulation due to a depleted capacity to cope. Of utmost importance is knowledge about the effects of stress and the role a leader plays when stress affects normal leaders as well as toxic leaders. Human resources personnel would also be called upon to assist with resolving employee dissatisfaction within the stresses of an organization. Stress from a manager can cause forms of toxicity in the department, which may lead to employee turnover. Senior management will need to know when stress hits a leader and derailment occurs.

### **The Human Resource Manager’s Role**

Human resource personnel are expected to step in and find a solution to the troubles created from employing a toxic leader, although the power to control the toxic leader is a responsibility held by senior management. If toxicity already exists within an organization, human resource personnel must be able to recognize it, test for its presence, or be prepared to handle the wave of negative change that will overcome the department if toxicity is not addressed. Without this knowledge an organization may not be able to

rebound from the negative consequences of employee turnover, endless distractions from unproductive work, absenteeism, and health issues a toxic leader can produce among followers. Part of the responsibility of human resource personnel is to recognize when toxicity affects team members and subordinates within an organization.

However, there is a gap in current literature on this subject. The disparity is the absence of understanding how organizations manage toxicity. This is demonstrated through the lived experience of human resource managers by this phenomenological study regarding how they handle the consequences of toxic leadership. This gap is created in part due to confidentiality clause agreements organizations require human resource personnel to sign, and in part due to studies focused more on followers and the follower reactions of working under a toxic leader. There are many stories of industries, people, corporate communities, and social stigmas that almost lead to emotional bankruptcy in organizations or cause irreparable damage to the essence of a company. Nonetheless, there are some stories told by human resource personnel on the effects of the toxic leader in organizations. Discussions abound regarding a definition of and viewpoints about toxic leaders from followers, managers, consultants, and sociologists. Human resource personnel, though, have not expressed their opinion regarding the concerns they have of working through conflict created by the toxic leader. Human resource managers also have not expressed specifics regarding mediating the conflict, or reasonable resolution for working with the toxic leader.

## **Human Resource Personnel: Support to Management**

If followers are tuned into the realization that a leader must have subordinates to direct, are provided the company and team rules, plus understand the boundaries of the leader-follower relationship, they too will react from consequence of a negative leader. A leader can only direct if the subordinates will follow. Employees experiencing this negativity may decide to leave a company, rebel against a leader, or become a whistleblower while informing the human resource department of the unethical behaviors of a toxic leader (Hogan, 2007). Employee motivation, as well as leader motivation, will work together to create a positive atmosphere of joint responsibility for completing tasks and successfully contributing to an organization for recognition in a joint effort to support the team. Human resource members perform the function of interacting between subordinate and senior management.

## **Challenges for the Human Resource Manager**

Some of the challenges for the human resources personnel include quantifying behavioral boundaries and tracking employee performance. Organizations nowadays must open their visions for hiring dedicated employees who support the organizational goals. Seeck and Parzefall completed a survey to confirm this truth. The conclusion of this survey supported their statement that “Rather than providing job security, certain benefits and salary, interesting work that allows employees to develop themselves and put their creativity to use is in the core of the appeal of workplaces” (Seeck & Parzefall, 2008, p. 485). Seeck and Parzefall (2008) further claimed that human resource personnel will then need to provide documentation of an atmosphere conducive to opportunity and

growth. Through understanding the issues that arise regarding toxic leadership from the viewpoint of the human resource personnel knowledge is gained regarding how to limit toxic behavior hold toxic leaders accountable for their actions.

Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) completed a study to confirm the effects of toxic leadership on employee job satisfaction, and how it affects commitment to the job performance. Their findings confirmed that employee commitment is lessened due to their belief in the degree of abusive or bullying treatment, and existence of toxic leadership. Mehta and Maheshwari supported that followers may sabotage organizations where they believe toxic leaders are encouraged. Employee support and satisfaction is directly related to treatment.

### **Examples of Case Studies Reveal Some Difficulties Human Resource Personnel Manage**

The case studies below demonstrate specific situations relevant to the subject matter of bullying, negative leadership, and toxic behavior. The purpose of inclusion for these case studies is to demonstrate that human resource personnel have difficulty trying to resolve conflict with toxic leaders. Sometimes human resource managers must progress through processes to the extreme of hiring an outside agent to act in behalf of the organization in order to satisfy legal, ethical, emotional, and modes of moral conduct. The set of circumstances surrounding the facts will demonstrate how toxic behavior by leaders negatively affects followers. Cangemi and Pfohl (2009) shared several situations that developed the definition of the toxic leader and personality behaviors the leader may demonstrate. The circumstances and case studies reveal the damage related to the

behaviors of toxic leaders. The interaction required by human resource personnel in resolving conflict arising between the toxic leader and the follower in communicating this to senior management is also demonstrated in case studies. Included within this study are three case studies to serve as examples of this demonstration. Bond et al. (2010) provided some evidence regarding a degree of knowledge human resource managers have on the evidence of toxic leadership, but do not supply the viewpoint of the human resource manager during the process of resolving negative management concerns. As this study examined the viewpoint of human resource personnel, it may provide the evidence to reduce the gap in knowledge regarding the experiences of the human resource personnel.

Senior managers are often not willing to spend funds toward costs to support the subordinate when they consider it unnecessary to request outside assistance in handling toxic personalities. “Harassment training is good for your business in two ways. It’s not only the law, but harassment in the workplace can damage your employee’s morale and your company’s productivity” (CalChamber, n.d., para. 1). The example provided by Goldman (2006) demonstrated limitations on the ability of human resource manager to assist in all disputes when toxic leaders are involved.

### **High Toxicity Leadership: A Case Study**

**Case Study 1.** Goldman (2006) discussed the interrelationships between dysfunctional organizations, their leaders, and the effect toxicity has on the organizational systems. This case study involved a leader named Favio in the design industry. Favio was seen to have a borderline personality disorder. Goldman first discussed the background of the strong personality Favio displayed as an artist and very

powerful designer. Switching personalities, displaying inconsistencies, and two lawsuits filed against the corporation by employees created a situation where human resource managers looked to outside consultants for assistance. The corporation recognized the talents Favio had in the design world, and Favio had made a substantial initial income of \$55 million for the corporation. Although senior management recognized his dysfunction as a leader, they acknowledged his talent as a designer. Favio was the head of 212 employees within a corporation that had 711 employees. Although Favio was given every opportunity to make amends for his behavior as a leader, he was unable to do so.

Providing evidence that the leader is toxic without attacking their personality is essential to disciplining or terminating the toxic leader. In the case study of Goldman and Favio, the human resource personnel had to convince senior management to find another route for handling conflict from this bad leader. Not only did the human resource manager document all activity Favio performed, both good and bad, but the case study reveals that Goldman was hired to assist with resolving the conflict from this leader. The case study also reveals that the human resource managers may warn senior management about this concern before them hiring the toxic leader, but senior management sometimes decides to hire the toxic leader anyway.

### **Unveiling Toxic Behavior in Dysfunctional Organizations**

Goldman (2008a) reflected on two case management studies involving a human resource manager who was new to the company who discovered toxic behavior in the leader of one department and proceeds to diagnosis and resolve the conflict. “Organizations have recognized that toxins have the effect of a poison and contaminate

individuals, team, and entire systems, and may spread insidiously and undetected” (Goldman, 2008a, p. 226). Goldman further related toxic behavior and the poison it can distribute to a cancer attacking the “human immune system, ranging from low-level viruses to the highly toxic melanoma cancer” (p. 226). Goldman changed the company name and company dynamics to protect the organizations, but claimed the case was a real scenario and he assisted in discovering toxic supervisors, organizational systems, and management styles that encourage conflict resolution when addressing toxic leaders.

**Case Study 2.** During an exit interview for a transferring employee, the human resource manager was able to determine the existence of a toxic situation created within the research and development department through the volatile behavior of the department supervisor (Goldman, 2008a). The human resource manager used this opportunity, along with the plunging profits, to convince senior management to allow the company to hire Goldman as an outside consultant who would interview the department team members and ascertain the toxic situation. “Clearly there was a lot of psychobabble in the form of dangerously unqualified DSM-styled diagnoses being spewed about in the form of character assassinations” (Goldman, 2008a, p. 229). The two head engineers of Research and Development had been highly competitive and had on more than one occasion expressed hurtful and emotionally damaging behavior toward each other. The negative behavior had smoldered for 6 years and was a root dysfunction within the company. During the performance of toxic detection and treatment of the cause, the organizational climate changed. The senior management team had to develop into a healthier organization and management style with new knowledge for identifying toxicity. They

also had to create a plan for healing the toxic environment in order to create better teams. This is another demonstration of senior management hiring a toxic leader without full knowledge of the negative consequences of toxic leadership.

**Case Study 3.** The third case study was at a heart institute where one cardiologist was allowed to act inappropriately in the surgical room (Goldman, 2008a). According to Goldman (2008a), the doctor was highly talented, knowledgeable, and preferred within his field, but his work ethic and behavior toward the surgical team was intolerable. The lead doctor displayed an “inappropriate temper and elitist behavior” during surgical procedures, leaving all personnel involved in the surgery feeling uneasy, nervous, fearful, and under emotional turmoil. Goldman (2008a) was hired to determine the cause of the turmoil and offer an assessment and intervention. “The Human Resource Director served as a toxin detector and handler for Eisenhower (the surgeon) but when crisis struck in cardiology, she chose to pass the baton along to the Durk and Borgus training team (outside consultants)” (Goldman, 2008a, p. 234). Through the Employer’s Resource Behavioral Assistance Program at the hospital, the doctor was diagnosed with anger issues arising from “temporarily suffering from a changing organization in a state of flux and upheaval” (Goldman, 2008a, p. 234). The ending commentary indicated that this situation was not recognized as serious until the human resource manager presented an issue of toxicity and recommended assistance or training takes place.

Goldman (2008a) noted organizational leaders often bury the issue because they do not want to address it. Toxic situations do not fix themselves, but require supportive top management, proactive decision-making, and strategic planning. The

recommendation was that detection, assistance, and intervention should come from an internal source of support, if possible. When toxicity continues without timely detection, organizational dysfunction continues, and the chances of malpractice increase. Goldman clearly noted that human resources and upper echelon leaders should address toxicity immediately. As a practicing consultant for companies willing to recognize toxic issues, Goldman (2008a) wrote about these firsthand experiences. The knowledge gained by the organization supports that there is value added to the company and employees by working through conflict situations and bonding that is created by understanding the need to address the consequences of toxic leadership.

### **Summary**

The definition used by Schmidt (2008) for toxic leadership, which includes narcissism, abusive supervision, authoritarian behavior, unpredictability, and self-promotion is supported through the review of literature. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 includes a discussion on the negative effect a toxic leader can have on an individual, a department, and an organization. Some organizations are purposeful in hiring a specific skill set, believing the leader will produce positive results by performing as the taskmaster to shape a team or department. It is not until after chaos arises or havoc is created that senior management may reconsider decisions made toward hiring the toxic leader. Human resources personnel must then cope with the stress of the employees and any legal issues that may occur.

The community connectedness that occurs when a supportive nontoxic leader bonds with followers is more productive and beneficial for a company. In contrast, there

is a great deal of discussion regarding toxic leadership, identifying toxic leaders, follower's attitude toward toxic leaders, and follower's identifying toxicity. Measuring the level of toxicity against the level of connected leadership can produce knowledge, which gives senior team leaders information for organizational decision-making. Better decision-making benefits the staff members, followers, and leaders while complementing the organization.

Senior management and the human resource personnel must then become a team formed to retain employees and resolve workplace conflict. Only by cultivating a way to identify the damage done by toxicity can a path to recovery for the team member, the department, or the organization clearly be seen (Cavaiola & Lavender, 2000). If staff members, leaders, and human resource personnel are prepared, trained, and knowledgeable prior to pandemonium or anarchy, organizational leaders will have more opportunity to resolve the conflict and manage the negative results from a toxic leader.

Working through toxicity, resolving issues of conflict, and gaining knowledge about the toxic leader will create hope for all organizational members, thus create more productive workplace atmospheres. An analysis of toxic leadership can take place within any viable human resources department whose leadership can convince senior management of the value of knowledge and the purpose of research. Toxicity within a company can destroy hours of hard work, devastate communities of teams, and have a severe adverse effect on the foundation of any company. Discovering a mediating mechanism to avoid this loss is an essential part of the human resources team. Providing the information to senior management for informed decision-making regarding handling

toxicity is also an essential part of the responsibility of human resource personnel.

Human resource managers must be given the support to complete the analysis, the respect from senior management to accept the measurements, and the confidence from organizational leaders to handle the job of keeping a toxic leader accountable for displayed behaviors.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of toxic leadership from the perspective of human resource personnel. This investigation was completed through interviews to understand how the human resource department dealt with toxicity, the toxic leader, and resolving the conflict created by this leadership style.

This varied set of behaviors and personal qualities exhibited by toxic leaders creates the background against which we can view the larger forces that make us suffer them...At other times, however, the leader's toxic behavior is far more circumscribed. (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 22)

Toxicity can be an environment within a workplace, whereas the toxic leader is a specific individual acting in the leadership role, having a negative effect on a team or organization. Chapter 3 includes an overview of the research design and describes the method used to understand the phenomenon.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

I reviewed and compared current literature and determined that the concept of toxic leadership in practice cannot sufficiently be captured using the approach of a quantitative study. There were no quantitative studies available to describe the human resource manager's viewpoint and insufficient qualitative literature available on this subject. This provided some evidence that a quantitative analysis would not be sufficient to capture the viewpoint of any human resource personnel. Goldman (2008) and Pellitier (2010) both posited there is a need for additional research in the area of clarity on toxic leaders. Goldman (2008) equated the need for a study to that of a scientific experiment.

The essence of capturing personal experience with those human resource managers who have mediated toxic situations may not be captured through the quantitative data. There are limitations to locating participants through a questionnaire who have experienced toxic leaders specifically, limitations to collecting data from those human resource personnel, or in understanding what specific questions to ask. When formulating a questionnaire for the human resource manager, the experience should be formulated to draw out the experience to create the questions. To explore the experiences that a human resource manager has had with the toxic leader, a qualitative analysis is favored. I was interested in locating those human resource managers who have direct experience of this nature. Therefore, I used a qualitative approach to understand this phenomenon of toxic leadership from the perspective of the human resource personnel.

Because all knowledge and experience are connected to phenomena, things in consciousness that appear in the surrounding world, inevitably a unity must exist between ourselves as knowers and the things or objects that we come to know and depend upon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 249).

There are various qualitative designs, but the one that seemed most appropriate to this investigation involves an inquiry among practitioners to determine their lived experience of the toxic leader in the workplace, which is a phenomenological study. Case study would not allow the exploration required to identify lived experiences of the human resource manager. Human resource personnel sign confidentiality agreements with their employers; therefore, in this situation keeping confidentiality was more controlled with the phenomenological study. Grounded theory would not be appropriate as insufficient

literature or information was available to produce a theory regarding lived experiences or processes used by human resource personnel, and I was not trying to develop a theory. A grounded theory may be adaptable as a future study, but would not be appropriate at this junction. A qualitative design such as ethnography would not be appropriate as ethnographic studies require observation over a lengthy timeframe and investigations of everyday behaviors would be required. Ethnographers will try to understand the culture of a group through historical observation (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001). It was not feasible for this study to record and observe the toxic situation each organization experienced as defined within this dissertation. Toxic leaders, as well as human resource managers, would not volunteer to be observed over several months. Thus, phenomenology was the best design for this study. “A phenomenological study is rooted in questions that give a direction and focus to meaning, and in themes that sustained an inquiry, awakening further interest and concern, and accounted for passionate involvement with whatever is being experienced” (Moustakos, 1994, p. 59). By interviewing human resource managers regarding toxicity and their experience with the toxic leader, I was able to understand the nature of their lived experience and the perceived effect of toxicity on the interpersonal environment in organizations.

Furthermore, I collected data regarding how human resource personnel managed the negative results of the toxic leader. An interview process was the best method for collecting this data and ensured the opportunity to confirm the participants had in fact experienced the conflict of a toxic leader. It also allowed dialog on recommendations for processes and explaining processes currently used. A qualitative study provided support

to develop a perspective of the experiences human resource managers had regarding discipline actions that should hold toxic leaders accountable for their actions. The data were coded for shared experiences to capture the major elements of their experience. This study may further the understanding of the impression toxic leaders leave on teams and organizations.

Originally, the goal was to interview 20 human resources personnel, though 10 is a typical quantity for a phenomenological study (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). Volunteers represented various industries and answered a series of questions specific to experiencing toxic leadership. The questions aimed at understanding the perspective of human resource personnel and the concerns they have in resolving the conflict arising from working with a toxic leader. The toxic leader has been identified in the literature (Cavaiola, & Lavender, 2000). However, there was insufficient literature available to show how human resource personnel identified, detected, and dealt with resolving conflicts due to the behaviors of toxic leaders within the workplace. I explored the experiences of human resource personnel to gain an understanding of toxic leadership and its perceived effect on interpersonal conflict between the toxic leader and the subordinates.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Both quantitative and qualitative designs could be used in a study of toxic leadership. However, a qualitative design was most appropriate for this study because I was interested in understanding the lived experience of the human resource managers who dealt with toxic leaders in their organizations. “Quantitative research is a formal, objective, systematic process, in which numerical data are utilized to obtain information

about the world" (Simon, 2011, p. 83). Quantitative research reflects "narrowness, conciseness, and objectivity, and leads to rigid adherence to research designs and precise statistical analysis" (Simon, 2011, p. 84). Where a phenomenon is still vague, as is the handling of deliberately using toxic leaders and the consequences of doing so, a qualitative approach is more appropriate.

An understanding of personal and subjective experience was created as a result of perspectives captured through the interviews with the human resource managers. During the research review, I was unable to find either a quantitative or qualitative research design regarding how to manage the toxic leader once chaos erupts within the organization from the perspective of human resource personnel. This study may inform and substantiate knowledge regarding how human resource personnel handle working with the toxic leader and what happens when management hires this personality type.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I performed the role of interviewing with as much of an unbiased position as possible. Although there was a specific set of questions to start the interview process, I treated these questions only as a starting point—see Appendix C. The definition of toxic leadership created by Schmidt (2008) was shared, and I explained that this was an exploratory study to collect data on the perspective of human resource personnel on behaviors of toxic leaders and issues they knew of that arose with this type of leader. It was imperative the interviewees were aware that the conversations were to be recorded and letters of consent were in place. All participants were aware that notes would be taken on their responses and they knew I would be the one taking these notes. I have no

professional attachment with the PIHRA organization, as my current position in the workforce is in commercial real estate.

Once the individual was ready to be recorded, the interview process began. Each question noted in Appendix C was presented and time allowed for the participant to have a turn at responding. My participation included acting as a moderator to assure the conversation stayed on track and the conversation was specific to the treatment of toxic leaders as defined in this research. As a moderator, it is important to keep the focus directly on the subject matter and provide courteous yet timely opportunity for each participant to answer each question accordingly. A time of 20 minutes per person for the entire interview was expected to suffice, with a 10-minute debriefing at the end.

### **Researcher Bias**

Through completion of a Master of Arts in Dispute Resolution and through life experience, it became evident to me that more discoveries are needed in the area of toxic leadership. Several studies were available regarding various forms and aspects of leadership, but limited knowledge was available on toxic leadership. This motivated me to understand the behaviors and the on-the-job reality of toxic leadership in organizations and how toxicity is managed. However, before steps toward conflict resolution can be applied in this arena, a full understanding of the actions, personality, behaviors, and consequences of working with the toxic leader must be clear. This research is yet another step toward understanding the current organizational consequences of the toxic leader and may assist in developing a deeper understanding of what is required for conflict resolution to be applied when working with a toxic leader.

## **Methodology**

In this dissertation, the phenomenon discussed is related to how human resource managers describe their experience with identifying and working with a toxic leader. During the discussions, I anticipated conversation to arise regarding other related subjects, such as how the toxic leader influences their subordinates, and how the toxic leader's behavior affects the organization. The basis for the research is to understand how the consequences of conflict by a toxic leader within an organization are handled through the human resource department. An attempt was made to understand if/why some executives deliberately delay dealing with toxic leaders.

### **Using a Phenomenological Study**

A phenomenological study uses interviews or key focus groups to explore the nature of the lived experiences of people in a particular situational concern. The human resource managers in this association would be provided an opportunity to openly and safely discuss what is experienced, felt, believed, and thought about working with the toxic leader. Expanding knowledge in the area of toxic leadership will occur from the key discussions, the analysis, and extensive examination of the responses.

### **The Gap in Knowledge**

The gap in knowledge within this area was: (a) what the human resource personnel experience about working with the toxic leader, (b) how they develop beliefs about and define toxic behaviors, and (c) how they use their experience when advising senior management when a conflict arises. There is insufficient literature available to

show how human resource managers resolve conflicts arising from toxicity or a toxic leader.

### **How This May Close the Gap**

This research provided an opportunity to share and expand valuable new information on the perspective of the human resource personnel. The data gathered provides the human resource perspective and perceptions regarding the toxic leader and what processes are available to build accountability for the toxic leader. Human resource personnel signed consent forms to assure that all discussions were held in confidence so they should not and cannot discuss specific employee situations. However, they can discuss situations from their experience without indicating the identities of individuals. These interviews allowed them a safe place to express their thoughts regarding their recommendations for working with toxic leaders.

### **Participants**

Interviews with 10 human resource managers who have experienced the problem of toxic leadership would be the correct quantity of interviews to be collected. In the original proposal, I intended to interview 20 human resource professionals from a Southern California professional human resource association. However, I was only able to secure 13 interviews after months of trying with the assistance of the association's executive director. Over a 3-month period of attempting to collect additional participants, I found that the human resource individuals were nervous and hesitant to discuss this subject. The consensus of those I spoke with stated the subject is very sensitive and they were concerned about violating organizational confidentiality. Therefore, the final

interviews were reduced to nine participants, because four of the participants opted out of the interviews after approximately 20-minutes. Creswell (2007) and Heidegger (1988) discussed the phenomenological approach to qualitative study and provide directive on the importance of saturation. The number of interviews decided upon is for the purpose of collecting a data saturation level. Ten interviews with human resource managers of varied work experience, a diverse organizational style, and specific experience with the toxic leader is sufficient to reveal a broad range of strategies for dealing with toxic leaders. The stories may be different, although the behaviors, conflicts, and results, are similar enough to ascertain sufficient conceptual representation through the sample of this quantity. The sample size led to a point when additional data will not add to the thematic understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, Saldona's (2012) definition of saturation includes a view of the culture involved in the phenomenon. Thirteen human resource managers is representative of this culture involved in the activities of the toxic leader. If more than 13 individuals volunteered to participate, they would provide further support for this study.

### **Pilot Study**

The supporting evidence for 13 participants was derived from a pilot study that was performed. A general discussion with through human resource managers before beginning the data collection for this dissertation study was completed in order to test the research questions in Appendix C. The test consisted of interviewing the three human resource personnel in order to determine if the questions in Appendix C were clear and understandable. The participants in the pilot study were asked about their lived

experiences in working with a toxic leader, how they managed the process, and what occurred to manage the aftermath of any conflict or chaos created by the toxic leader. The goal of the pilot study was to determine if the interview questions were sufficient, and if the discussions led to similar comments, conclusions, and methods of resolution used by these three individuals. The discussions were performed by the use of face-to-face interviews with human resource managers who have had prior experiences with toxic leaders, and developed processes for organizations to manage the toxic leader. A face-to-face conversation did support the use of questions as presented in the Appendix C. The pilot study consisted of three volunteer individuals who have had prior experience managing a toxic leader, were employed as a human resource manager during the toxic event, and had a minimum of 5 years of experience in human resource. The study took place after IRB approval of the proposal. All participants in the pilot study signed the consent form, but they were not recorded.

### **Participant Collection**

Professional Institute of Human Resource Association currently has a membership of 3,500 people representing 2,500 organizations (pihra.org, 2012) and is known to be the largest affiliate chapter in the Society for the Human Resource Management, with 180 continuing education programs available at all times. Southern California has 13 individual areas of representation (pihra.org, 2012). A convenience sample of 13 managers from a PIHRA chapter who have experienced the hiring, consequences of, and response to a toxic leader would assure a broad perspective of the human resource manager's experience. Appendix A represents the initial e-mail interest

sent to confirm PIHRA is willing to allow participation. Appendix A-1 is a copy of the letter of cooperation sent to the representative for PIHRA, which was signed and sent directly to the Walden IRB.

The participants in this study were volunteers drawn from the Los Angeles membership basin of PIHRA. District 8 consists of 236 members within a County division of the Los Angeles basin. The population size for this study were 75 human resource individuals who attending the monthly meeting where a presentation was given, and the 236 members who received the e-mail message. A primary sample of 13 responded as being willing to participate in the study. The sampling technique was practiced by giving a short presentation during a monthly meeting in order to gain volunteer interest, and the use of the e-mail message as illustrated in Appendix B. The criteria for accepting volunteers was that they must have had at least 5 years of experience in the business sector in a department of human resources and were currently employed in this capacity. Most importantly, they had to confirm having had direct experience managing situations involving toxic leaders.

The 13 original volunteers were asked to express their thoughts and feelings regarding the effect of the experience on themselves, and their organization. These participants shared on a volunteer basis any experience, thoughts, concerns, or recommendations for managing the toxic leader and managing a toxic environment in the workplace. There were nine final independent, individual interviews of human resource managers, as explained in the results, rather than the 13 anticipated. Four of the primary study participants opted out of the interviews during the first 20-minutes by stating they

felt uneasy sharing confidential company information. The interviews were scheduled within 10 days following the presentation and e-mail blast, or advertisement for volunteers, regarding discussions on their general experiences related to toxic leaders. All participants were interviewed at an office close to the PIHRA location in California within 2 weeks.

### **Interviewing Human Resource Personnel**

Often human resources are required to find a fix, a resolution, to the problems and deliver a recommendation for those issues that arise within a company. “Strategic importance and orientation of human resource management has a multi-factor influence on improving the competitive advantage and position of the company” (Milica, 2012, p. 83). However, human resource managers may not be given the support or foundation by top management to resolve the issues resulting from toxic leaders, or be trained in mediation.

The shared information also establishes some of the difficulties human resource managers experience in dealing with this leadership style. “In all forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews with individuals. The most common form used in phenomenological research is the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another” (Merriam, 2001, p. 71). The results of the phenomenological study are presented from the perspective of the human resource personnel to inform organizations and the executive board members regarding circumstances resulting from employing toxic leaders. A presentation to the PIHRA organization at their monthly meeting was arranged once the dissertation is

completed and approval received from IRB. This presentation provided the necessary feedback to those who participated, without the use of any names, and gave back valuable information on managing the toxic leader.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The logic in interviewing the members of this association is self-explanatory. The literature research shows there is insufficient information from the perspective of the human resource personnel on the subject of the toxic leader. The best way to obtain this knowledge is to ask human resource personnel about their lived experience. The most efficient way to select a group of individuals was by using an existing human resource association because the duties of the human resource manager are discussed within the alliance of the members. It would be too daunting of a task to go to independent companies and ask if their human resource manager would be allowed to attend and interview. Additionally, it is less than probable that an organization would be comfortable with having the interview on site regarding this subject at their company. Therefore, finding an association specifically for the human resource personnel who would allow a volunteer study is a more logical choice for obtaining volunteers.

### **Procedures for Recruitment**

Recruiting volunteers for the data collection was handled through PIHRA. I spoke to the regional representative to confirm interviews may occur with volunteers who may be interested in the subject of toxic leadership. The intent was to collect 10 to 20 volunteers in the field of human resource management that have had direct contact with the experience of working with a toxic leader. The overview would entail a

presentation—not more than 10 minutes—showing the group the subject of the study, an advertisement – shown as Appendix B, and/or an e-mail message from the PIHRA Career Center designed to collect volunteers. The advertisement informed volunteers to contact me directly via cell phone, or at my Waldenu.edu e-mail address. Once participants volunteered for the interview it was important to have the scheduled dates set to quickly capture their attention and obtain commitment from them. During the presentation of the project, the discussion included explaining the consent form, assuring the confidentiality of the volunteer's experience, the purpose of understanding the human resource perspective on toxic leaders, and the process of the interviews.

### **Instrumentation**

Materials used for data collection included the questions in Appendix C, and an observation sheet, which was a yellow lined note pad used to jot down notes and actions of verbal and nonverbal language. The questions in Appendix C were derived from the research questions, and were developed to create verbal interaction regarding the lived experiences of the participants. The interview protocol was to first discuss the consent form and the purpose of the study. All participants were given the consent form and were required to sign it in order to proceed with the interview—see Appendix D. Participants were also informed that the meetings was recorded using an audio tape recording method. No other instrumentation should be necessary to complete the initial interviews.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews determined the basis for understanding the phenomenon and experiences of working with a toxic leader. The interviews were scheduled for 40-minute

sessions one at a time. All volunteers were told they may terminate the meeting if they feel uncomfortable at any time. Volunteers were assured that the names of individuals and companies would be left out of all records. Time of day and confirmation of a 40-minute window was clarified at the start of each interview. Each participant was scheduled for different time slot of interviews during a 2-hour timeframe, within a 2-week period. The data were used to create a descriptive understanding of what human resource personnel experience when working with the toxic leader (Moustakas, 1994). This data illustrates the various steps human resource managers take when a conflict arises. A future quantitative study may be a follow up to this qualitative study. Currently no information is available for quantitative analysis, and the interviews may assist in creating relevant questions. The completed study includes how situational conditions influence the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Data were collected using interview questions listed on Appendix C and a recording device. The data were then transferred to transcripts for easier analysis using Dedoose. This data will be stored for 5 years in a secure locked box stored in a secured offsite storage unit. All materials will be destroyed after the 5 years by delivering the materials to a shredding location for proper disposal.

### **Data Analysis**

The initial coding categorized the information into identifiable ideas and thoughts shared by the human resource personnel. Similar concepts were collected into themes. Initial codes were then aggregated by matching similar ideas to create themes thus presenting a pattern of beliefs, concepts and steps each human resource manager

expresses or experiences. This process was repeated at least once and another aggregation occurred to connect any similar patterns to those concepts already analyzed and labeled.

The steps consist of:

1. Complete the interview.
2. Read and transfer the data into a transcript.
3. Complete open coding to prepare labels that fit the interview responses.
- This is known as horizontalization or preliminary grouping.
4. Complete a constant comparison of the coding to narrow the data into code categories until the data fits the defined set. This is called reduction or elimination.
5. Complete a theoretical re-sampling, as needed, to confirm there is sufficient understanding of the experience. Anything that does not express the experience would be eliminated.
6. Write the memorandum on each data set. Cluster and theorize each data set for related constants or Invariant Constituents. The related clusters would define the core theme of the experience.
7. Focus the coding to fit the data codes that seem to reappear.
8. Examine the data for common phenomenon and experiences until there is saturation. Confirm the themes against the completed record of the participant to confirm there is compatibility. This would be considered the Textural Description for each participant. Verbatim examples would be included as verification and confirmation.

9. Prepare an understanding on the common thread of the phenomenon, thus developing a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, which would represent the entire group of participants.
10. Repeat the process, as needed until a complete understanding is obtained from the experience to confirm the data is dependable.

### **Exit Study and Debriefing**

The interviews were kept to 40-minutes per participants. This is sufficient time to have a thorough conversation, and to keep the attention of the participants. It was also sufficient time to provide a respect for their personal schedules, and keep the dialogue specific to the subject of toxic leadership. At the beginning of the interview sessions the timeframe for the interviews was made clear. Toward the end of the interviews, approximately 10 minutes before the end of the 30-minute window, I reminded the interviewee that there was approximately 10 minutes left of our time and began to debrief the individual. This was completed in a bullet point fashion, by restating a few of the ideas introduced. I then thanked all participants for their time and the fact they volunteered, than ask for any last thoughts on the subject they would like to share. Anyone having last minute thoughts was given 2 to 3 minutes to share as healthy closure to the discussion. Upon completion and acceptance of the dissertation, PIHRA has agreed to allow me to return to a monthly meeting and share a Power Point presentation of the results. This will open a door for future conversations on this subject and share valuable information to the human resource association.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness and Ethical Procedures**

PIHRA is an organization specifically created for the purpose of coordinating and updating human resource tools within the community of human resource managers. The organization assists in the coordination of news and information, which is specific to the needs of human resources personnel (pihra.org, 2012). Newman, a division manager of PIHRA, at The Career Center, agreed to cooperate in coordinating the interview process for this study, see Appendix A. PIHRA provides what they call an online Job Career Opportunity for human resource personnel to volunteer to participate this study. The participants had an opportunity to be interviewed regarding their personal experiences with the toxic leader. There were nine people interviewed, and all participants signed a consent form. The information provided by the participant was held in strict confidence and the content protected. The participant was presented with questions regarding their thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and viewpoints of working with toxic leaders. IRB approval was obtained prior to further communications with PIHRA.

Completing the research through the PIHRA location lessened several ethical concerns and provided the volunteers a sense of community since they were familiar with their surroundings. “Most ethical issues could be categorized by one of the following: (a) protection from harm, (b) informed consent, (c) rights to privacy and (d) honesty with professional colleagues” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 107). There was no need for incentives for the participants in order to complete these interviews. An incentive includes items such as a dinner gift card, or a percentage discount on their PIHRA membership, although none were distributed.

The data were collected close to the PIHRA office in order to assure a safe and comfortable place where the human resource volunteers felt relaxed about sharing their thoughts. Separate interviews within separate 2-hour timeframes were performed. All participants who sign a consent form were assured the information would not be shared openly outside of these meetings, and that no company names or personnel will be mentioned. Appendix D, the Consent Form, was provided to each participant during an introduction and informational session at the start of the interview. Each participant had the opportunity to sign the form, or decline to be interviewed, if they were uncomfortable or did not fit the necessary criteria for experience with the toxic leader.

A participant number was used in place of a participant's name. The interview and recording took approximately 40 minutes, and I kept the interview to that time limit. During mediation training for my Masters in Dispute Resolution I learned the attention span of humans is best if interviews fit within this time frame. This is a sufficient time span to capture the thoughts and ideas of the participants. Additional interviews were set at a separate time for individuals who wished to extend the discussion, or essential questions in Appendix C are not completed. An open opportunity at that time was allowed as needed for deeper and more intent conversation that arose.

### **Credibility and Confirmability**

In order to confirm the credibility of information provided by the human resource personnel the analysis of the collected data included matching between the responses of the participants. Member checking was completed by building a rapport with the participant to obtain open responses, and then restating and confirming what they shared

by summarizing what they said. A return response of confirmation from the participant assured accuracy and completeness. This data were then used for coding. Once the data were coded into preliminary grouping, the data were compared to participant responses for similarity and confirmability. The realities represented by the similarity supported the credibility of the particular perspective or position provided by the participant. “Member checking is the process of verifying information with the targeted group” (Simon, 2011, p. 98). This exercise was repeated until reliable and justifiable confidence in the data was confirmed by the repeated concept of the individual perspective. A description of how the results are accepted or restricted is elaborated on within the analysis of Chapter 4 and 5.

### **Transferability**

Organizations that decide to analyze their own structure or level of toxic leadership may be able to use the processes shared by this research. The logic for transferring this procedure to another PIHRA chapter may possible as the same process can be duplicated, yet the participants would be different. The procedure for collecting the data is foundational and may be extended. The participants who volunteer for this study were random, with the control theme being prior experience with the toxic leader. The literature review provides sufficient support for the issue of toxic leadership as applied to any culture, and any industry (Lipman-Blueman, 2004; Tepper, 2007). Toxic leadership is found as an organizationally wide predicament, and does not discriminate against a particular industry, race, or creed (Appelbaum, Semerjian & Mohan, 2012). As the instrumentation is skeletal, its use is also foundational and may be easily constructed and repeated within expanded arenas. Additional research and future studies may

continue to elaborate on this test process to discover even more methods for managing the toxic leader.

### **Dependability**

A point of sufficiency can be found within the quantity of the nine individual perspectives that support the concepts and opinions of those who were interviewed. This is a significant saturation point for dependability of this phenomenon. Although the study is built upon individual experiences, the parallels of each experience were matched up to show consistency with the methods of managing the toxic leader within those who participated. The processes can be understood through the repeated coding, words, definitions, and rational for methods used by the human resource managers in identifying, managing, and handling consequences of the conflict. The data were initially coded in accordance with repeated terms, or ideas the participants used when describing their experiences. These terms were then coded into focused concepts and categories in order to align the ideas. Themes were developed from the concepts, and then any theories categorized in order to establish saturation in concepts.

### **Summary**

This chapter included a detailed description of the qualitative design, the phenomenological design, and data analysis procedures implemented to investigate the human resource manager's practices, and lived experiences that have helped human resource personnel manage the toxic leader. Also included in the design is a description of communications with senior management, and a process for resolving conflict that did or may occur as a result of working with a toxic leader. Benefits of this research include

human resource departments being better able to develop systems for managing the toxic leader.

The protocol for the design was (a) to interview a minimum of 10 human resource personnel, (b) to code the transcripts and gather common perspectives into themes, and (c) to analyze the coding and provide a perspective regarding what human resource manager's recommend for early identification of the toxic leader and their handling once identified.

Understanding the experience within social structures can best be described through those who experience the phenomenon or those who have observed the phenomenon. A phenomenological approach to this research should capture the experience of the human resource manager through the interviews that occurred and the collective data coding which led to a description of the experiences and the methods of dealing with toxic leaders from the perspective of human resource managers. The goal of this study was to describe the experiences of working with the toxic leader, define and describe the effects toxic leaders can have on an organization, and show that conflict would be resolved more effectively when followers and senior management learn how to work with the toxic leader.

## Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 4 describes the phenomenological study that was completed regarding the human resource manager's perspective of managing conflict, the consequence of toxic leaders' behavior. A phenomenological study was used in order to understand what the individual's experience is during the actual occurrence of the phenomenon (McCoy & Northcutt, 2004). The data collected on the human resource manager's perspective of managing the interpersonal conflict created by toxic leaders, and the process for collecting the data on this subject, is included within the body of the chapter. An analysis of the data and a narrative on the results of the findings are provided in order to understand each individual's experience. The chapter includes the steps taken in this study as well as the thought process that paralleled each step. A discussion is included toward the end of the chapter that develops the thoughts and describes the emotions of the human resource manager regarding what it feels like to experience toxicity from their position of responsibility in the organization.

The data collection centered on human resource managers who were members of a chapter of PIHRA. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What processes and methods do human resource managers use to identify toxic leaders (RQ1)?
2. What processes and methods do human resource managers use to manage toxic leaders (RQ2)?
3. How do human resource managers handle the ensuing consequences (RQ3)?

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted with three human resource managers who had experienced toxic leadership. These individuals were human resource managers I had worked with at prior organizations. A telephone call to each person confirmed their willingness to participate in the pilot study. I reached out to these specific individuals because I knew they had prior experience with toxic leadership. Each individual had in excess of 5 years of experience in the field of human resource management, and each confirmed having had at least one personal experience of managing the conflict related to a toxic leader. The characteristics of the pilot study mirrored the actual study. A pilot study was performed in order to clarify the interview questions and complete any modifications that may have been necessary. I contacted all three participants directly and they agreed to participate. All participants signed the consent forms as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### **Demographics of Pilot Study**

The demographics of each participant are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *Demographics of Pilot Participants*

Part. No.	Gender	Ethnicity	Education	Industry	Age.	Years as a Human Resource Manager
1	Female	Caucasian	BA	Real Estate	53	16
2	Female	Caucasian	MA	Banking	44	13
3	Male	Caucasian	MA	Aeronautics	56	7

All volunteers were assured of complete confidentiality, and the interviews took place at my office in California on three separate Saturdays. The interviews were not

recorded as this was a pilot study used to determine whether the interview questions would extract the lived experience of the human resource manager. A short interval of minor conversation took place in order to make them comfortable and at ease. The best argument for using individual items on a questionnaire is the careful examination of the tool during a pilot test (Simon, 2011). Each interview question was posed to the respondent, and I wrote down their replies. Table 2 represents a sample of the responses recorded from the pilot study paralleled to the research questions.

Table 2

*Pilot Study Response as Related to Research Questions*

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Related RQ
In the beginning the toxic leader appeared to be knowledgeable and pleasant, but when employees started complaining I knew we had a real problem. It wasn't long before they started quitting their jobs for new positions and companies.	The toxic leader is not easily identified until events occur after their employment.	RQ1
Once employees started complaining and we, senior management and I, had a meeting with him to advise him the actions were not acceptable. The toxic leader then filed a suit against the company for stress, which put everything on hold and we had to hire an attorney.	Senior management must agree to place the toxic leader on notice for any actions that go against company policy. This is the beginning of a process and can deepen the conflict.	RQ2&3

<p>Once we received information that the toxic leader had filed suit it became a game of back and forth with attorneys, mediators, and stressful communication.</p>	<p>The conflict created stress for human resource and senior management, significant damage, and was only resolved by removal of the toxic leader.</p>	RQ2&3
<p>Meanwhile the toxic leader was still running the show at the office. At the end of the suit the toxic leader was paid the equivalent of 2 year's salary to disappear.</p>		RQ2&3
<p>Since I work in the field of human resource, have a law degree, and am trained in mediation I was able to manage the conflict and resolve this dispute successfully.</p>	<p>With proper training it is possible to resolve the conflict created by the toxic leader.</p>	

### **Response Examples Taken From the Pilot Study**

The interview questions as shown in Appendix C proved suitable to elicit individuals sharing their lived experience with toxic leaders. An example of the responses to the interview question are displayed as Participant 1 for RQ1 suggested that companies do not identify toxic leaders during the hiring process; toxic leaders evolve. She made this claim by telling about her experience of a reduction of staff in the company during the economic crisis of 2008. According to the information she provided, the events created financial strife for the organization and employees, as well as senior management. The participant stated that toxicity emerged while the organization was trying to survive the economic downturn. The phenomenon experienced by this participant, according to her, left feelings of anxiety, confusion, fear, and a heightened sense of defense. According to this participant, the fear was brought on by thoughts of a recurrence in

evolving toxicity, and doubt in measuring her ability to hire better leaders. The confusion was developed by her doubt that senior management would provide clear direction for replacing this leader because of the economic status the company was experiencing.

Participant 2 responded to RQ2 through a story wherein removal of a toxic leader was difficult because senior management had to be convinced there was a negative effect from this leader and the necessity of removing this leader. This participant's explanation of events included a new hire situation that evolved into toxicity after approximately 3 months of employment with the company. The human resource manager was then ordered by senior management to document behaviors, actions, negative results, and negative impact caused by the toxic leader. "The human resource manager had to prove there was cause for concern" (Participant 2) to senior management in order to convince them that teams and the corporation were being harmed by this toxic leader. When the toxic leader then filed suit against the organization it became a legal battle of cause for releasing this toxic leader. This participant shared that between documenting the activities and behavior, and the multiple legal documents required; it took the organization over 1 year to settle on severance pay for this toxic leader because of the wrongful termination suit filed against the banking organization. The participant was not allowed to share the specifics of evidence. However, Participant 2 stated that the event left her spent with anxiety, cautious of speaking out to provide opinions on any subject matter, and doubting her ability as a human resource professional.

When discussing RQ3, Participant 3 shared some of the process his company used to cope with the conflict once the toxic leader was identified. In describing the process,

Participant 3 stated, “The vice president was willing to hire an outside consultant as an internal ombudsman to interview the employees and hear the complaints made by the employees” (Participant 3). According to Participant 3, the current human resource process was riddled with legality and formal ineffective processes that stunted the company’s ability to release the toxic leader. Senior management understood that an ombudsman would allow the company to speed up the process of termination, support the claims of abuse and unproductive promoting, while negotiating the enlarged pride of the toxic leader.

Based on the results of the pilot study, the interview questions were determined to be suitable for data collection. While interviewing the pilot study volunteers, my intent was to discover any recommendations for revisions required in the interview questions. All three individuals were asked about the relevancy of the interview questions and stated they found the formatted questions provided in Appendix C to be relevant matter and suggestive enough to be used for collection of process and perspective on human resource personnel. The responses collected from the pilot volunteers directly relate to the research questions of (a) a processes used to identify toxic leaders, (b) a processes for managing the toxic leader, and (c) how the consequences are determined and managed. The questionnaire enabled dialog that provided perspective on the impact of toxic leadership in organizations from the position of a human resource personnel. This phenomenological study was about their jobs and their personal experiences from their point of view. The research questions are discussed in depth within the Results section of this dissertation.

### **Research Setting**

The Los Angeles basin area of the Professional Institute of Human Resource Association (PIHRA) includes a total of 14 districts. The 14 districts include several groups within multiple counties. Those districts cover Los Angeles County, Ventura County, North Orange County, South Orange County, and Riverside County (pihra.com, 2012). This is a total radius of 120 miles from the PIHRA Los Angeles office. I reached out to each district, as approved through IRB, and requested volunteers from all 14 districts.

In order to assure complete confidentiality and comfort for each participant I was able to obtain permission from a nearby management office to use a vacant suite at an office building in California located two miles from PIHRA District 8. The setting of each meeting included a private vacant office with two comfortable chairs, a small table to place the recorder on, and drinks or snacks as appropriate. No other items or persons were in the room. The room was quiet, professional, and provided a secure environment for each participant.

### **Demographics**

The demographics of each participant are shown on Table 3 below.

Table 3

*Demographics of Interview Participants*

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education	Industry	Years in Job
1	56	Male	Caucasian	MA	Banking Office Supplies	22
2	36	Female	Caucasian	BA	Office Supplies	14
3	48	Female	Caucasian	MA	Production	20
4	36	Male	Hispanic	BA	Government	12
5	34	Female	Black	MA	Production	12
6	43	Male	Asian	BA	Education	8
7	31	Female	Caucasian	MA	Production	8
8	70	Female	Caucasian	BA	Banking	32
9	43	Female	Caucasian	MA		17

The group was a diverse representation of the human resource field. Each participant had more than eight years of experience in the position of human resource manager, and did acknowledge having had experience specifically with a toxic leader. This is important because the guideline of the dissertation was that each participant must have a minimum of five years of experience. Human resource managers are required to have a minimum of a Bachelor of Arts degree and to be certified in human resource training. According to the HR Certification Institute the human resource certification entails a state recognized training in the field of human resources. All participants confirmed they had attended the certification courses, as required. This information substantiates that the human resource manager is a trained professional and represents the company with ethical and reliable knowledge. The information they provide can be trusted as true reflections of their experience.

## **Data Collection**

A total of nine participants are included in the final data analysis. This group of nine individuals does not include any of the pilot study participants. To understand the pertinent information described within the data, specific information is drawn from the interviews. Integrating the concepts created by Moustakas (1994), cluster samples were created using the participant responses. The relevance of the sampling was directly related to the research questions. Clusters are used as a method for joining the common ideas to formulate themes for each code (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The interview responses were then used to prepare codes. Codes are used to represent matching ideas across all items where multiple responses were similar among the nine participants. Both codes and clusters are presented in order to better represent the concept of human resource personnel's perspective on the issue of toxic leadership.

In compliance with the Research Design of Chapter 3, I reached out to the district leader for each of the 14 districts. District 8 agreed to allow me to complete a short 10-minute presentation to the County District shortly after receiving approval to proceed from Walden University IRB. Recruiting participants was difficult as their main concern was exposure. Below is a listing to clearly define the total number of participants:

1. There were originally 13 participants within the membership of 4,000 PIHRA members who agreed to be interviewed.
2. A collection of four participants of the original 13 participants ended the interview at the beginning stages and decided not to complete the interviews,

stating they felt uneasy, unnerved, uncomfortable, and experienced anxiety over the discussion of toxic leadership within their specific organization.

3. Only nine participants completed the interviews and are included in the total analysis.

All precautions were taken with respect to confidentiality, IRB processes, consent, and assurance of a secure location to all who were presented with the opportunity to be interviewed, and yet there were very few willing participants. The proposal was submitted with the anticipation of obtaining 20 participants completing a face-to-face interview on the process of managing toxic leaders. The information fell strictly within the IRB approval and guidelines, and with 110 members in the room, I thought it would not be difficult to obtain the 20 required volunteers. However, the final interview count was a total of nine human resource managers who had confirmed experience with a toxic leader.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis is divided into four different sections: (a) providing specific data about the interviews, the process used for documenting events, and discovering the existence of a toxic leader, (b) a display of codes and themes, (c) a description of the phenomenon experienced by the human resource manager, and (d) a narrative on the total data collected. The data are provided first and the phenomenon of experience follows thereafter. The transcribed interviews support the stories, share the emotions, and provide data to interpret codes and themes.

Once all participants were recorded, the information was transcribed into several MSWord documents. I did all the transcribing directly following the interviews. The meaning portrayed by each participant was more accurately reflected because I participated in the recorded sessions. Additionally, this assured that the words typed matched the words spoken verbatim. With nine participants, this was a very manageable task.

The transcriptions were downloaded into an analysis program called Dedoose. Next all statistical demographic information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and also downloaded into the program. Dedoose is an online internet based qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods analysis program ([userguide.dedoose.com](http://userguide.dedoose.com)). The data is preserved within a secure internet access program. Once the analysis was completed all information was exported back to my computer for proper storage, control of backup and archiving.

The Dedoose program provides for codes to be created, labeled, and inserted into an analysis file. The codes are matched by reading through each participant's response, highlighting and tying all relevant matching codes to the various responses, then analyzing the similar patterns. Dedoose allows the researcher to run various data analyses, and trace common themes as many times, and as many variations, as is necessary in order to find a pattern of responses, common trends in response reflections, and frequent terms used by each participant.

## Description of the Interview Process

Of the nine interviews, three were willing to be more open, while the other participants appeared very cautious in sharing their thoughts, concerns, and experiences. When necessary I would remind them again that their comments are confidential, their names and company names would not be discussed, and that the information would be synthesized to provide a total common understanding of the toxic leader from the perspective of the human resource manager. This seemed to be necessary in order to remove their anxiety. The expressions of the emotional experience are fully described within the Results section of the study.

After completing several analyses, the files were then exported back to Excel and stored for future use within the study. Saldana's (2007, 2009) method of qualitative analysis was followed, which includes first cycle, second cycle, and themeing the data. The first step of analysis is to discover codes for each participant response.

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.

(Saldana, 2009, p. 3)

Using the Microsoft Word files, I read through each interview and highlighted the common codes. The common remarks yielded a first cycle codes of 35 as shown in Appendix E. One additional code was added to confirm a match between the participants' definition and the definition by Schmidt (2008) as referenced in Chapter 2. This

definition labels five behaviors which all need to be present in order to identify the toxic leader: narcissistic, abusive, authoritarian, self-promoting, and unpredictable.

### **Qualitative Analysis: First Cycle Codes**

First cycle codes used by the participants were collected by using the interview questions. Once the interviews were transcribed, the comments were first correlated by quantity of common responses by the individuals. This allowed for the most common ideas and experiences to be recognized. Those experiences were then paralleled with the research questions to see how and where the themes evolved. The data in Table 2 relates the codes identified in the responses to the research questions and demonstrates the identification of a toxic leader, or toxicity in the workplace, matched with processes identified by each participant. The initials SR represent senior management. The initials HR represent the human resource manager. The initials TL represent toxic leader.

Table 4

*Frequent First Cycle Codes as Related to Research Questions*

Code	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	Behavior/Incident/Participant No
Companies do not try to identify toxic leaders	X			Informative, storytelling, shared specifics/All
Cost over \$50k to address		X		Human resource was annoyed, frustrated, discussed specifics of events, consequences, cause, mediator or counseling toxic leader, and concern of repeating incidents/2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9
Discuss with senior management does help		X		Human resource discussed subordinate complaints, team affects, consequence of toxic leader, and how to proceed, felt relieved, supported with action plan/1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9
Toxic leader has a domino or negative trickle-down affect		X		Human resource was anxious, fidgety, animated, storytelling, stated that teams expressed fear of toxic leader consequences, confusion, uncertainty, company effects of toxic leader behavior/2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Employees exit		X		Toxic leader is unpredictable, Human resource was storytelling, anxious, concerned, Subordinates leaving or filing suit, senior management non-responsive at first, human resource must convince with facts/All

Human resource has to act as agent/motivator to keep up subordinate moral	X	X	Toxic leader acted authoritarian, arrogant, abusive, subordinate complain more, uncertain of senior management actions, human resource concern for significant negative consequences to company/All
New leaders bring positive results		X	Current senior management was not responsive soon enough, or may be a toxic leader, toxic leader was removed, human resource felt relieved/1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9
Toxic leader frequently receives severance pay		X	Toxic leader authoritarian, denial, did not accept responsibility for actions, does not self-identify behavior, filed suit, hired attorney, human resource nervous, fearful, bullied, stressed, and uncertain, senior management response varied/1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9
Start discovery with employee interviews	X		Subordinates complain, Human resource contemplative/1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9
Toxic leader destroys company processes	X	X	Toxic leader steps on toes of others, has own agenda, humiliates team and bullies other managers, forces control, ignores warnings from senior management/All

Toxic leader has no people skills	X	X	X	Employee negative reactions, toxic leader ignores others, narcissistic, speaks over others, bossy, rude, poor listening, feelings of humiliation, fear, anger, resentment by human resource and teams/1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9
Toxic leader is identified by employee complaints	X			Multiple employees, 5% increase in department issues, loss of productivity, employee work comp suit, third party may be hired to handle/All
Toxic leader is not held accountable for actions	X			Human resource tells senior management but no actions taken, toxic leader self-promotes to confuse senior management, human resource feels humiliated, discouraged, anxious, toxic leader is rude to human resource, mistreats, malicious, arrogant to teams and others/2, 4, 6, 7, 8
Toxic character fits as defined by Schmidt	X	X	X	Narcissistic, abusive, authoritarian, self-promotes, unpredictable./All

### Examples of Specific Data Collected Related to Research Questions

As an example of how the interviews proceeded, relating to RQ1, Participant 1, currently an outside human resource consultant, remembered an experience from 20 years ago and said the experience never really goes away. He shared that it was such a harmful emotional experience that “it still sticks in my brain” (Participant 1). This is significant because it demonstrates that even human resource personnel are negatively affected by

this leadership style and the effects have a lasting negative emotional impact. The toxic leader for this individual was authoritarian and narcissistic, thus affected both perception and attitude within the work atmosphere. He described his experience of being transferred into a department managed by a toxic leader.

Participant 1 provided the specifics of how this toxic leader would act narcissistic by supplying her own agenda for timelines of reporting and processes of workflow, even when her processes were counter-productive and against company policy. Although employees were trying to be proactive subordinates by fulfilling what they believed their jobs entailed, thus demonstrating what they defined as a good job, the toxic leader kept barricading the progress through her agenda. The narcissist and authoritarian behaviors of the toxic leader created resentment, confusion, frustration, and discouragement.

Participant 6 expressed bitterness from his toxic leader experience by sharing how team atmospheres are destroyed, emotions are suppressed or degraded and subordinates get depressed. “That is not really how you are going to get people to follow you. It doesn’t bring out the best in people” (Participant 6). Participant 7 was very matter-of-fact, “As a human resource person we keep a feel for personality and it becomes intuitive” (Participant 7). The variation is partially a quality of personality and in part is derived from the relevant experience each person endured.

The expanded version of the codes, shown in Appendix E and F, represents the specific verbal responses of the human resource participants within each interview. The phenomenon experienced by these nine participants is similar and reflects a pattern of

difficulty they perceive when managing the toxic leader. These responses are comments made by the human resource that support the interpretation of the data.

### **Qualitative Analysis: Second Cycle Codes**

The steps defined within Saldana's (2009) method of qualitative analysis include (a) completing the interview, (b) transcribing the data, (c) preparing open coding or first cycle preliminary coding, (d) narrowing the coding by comparing the data (second cycle), (e) defining a set to confirm the experience (third cycle). Using Saldana's methods the second round of coding shown in Appendix E discerned 14 codes, and a pattern surfaced to design a clear path for the human resource perspective. The data from the first cycle were again analyzed for codes that repeat or may be combined for a pattern, then described in the second cycle. A theme was established from these combined codes in order to clarify the human resource experience. These codes and themes were placed into clusters to narrow the information into usable data that would explain the experience. The data is collected, analyzed, and then cross-referenced to each research question. The Results section of this study aggregate the collected data for each specific research question. This presents the basis of the qualitative phenomenological analysis—how did they feel, their perspective—when working with the toxic leader. The first, second, and third cycle codes represent the process and methods and respond to Research Questions 1, 2 and 3 (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3) regarding identifying and managing the process of a toxic leader. The participant responses that identify the emotion are expanded within the Research Results section of this study.

The second cycle codes of the nine participants describe their similar perspectives of a process and reveal common definitions for the difficulty of the behavior displayed by the toxic leader. Table 5 illustrates repeated concepts within the participants and describes the themes established from the second cycle codes demonstrating the experience of the participants. These codes are taken from the comments made by the participants and are shortened only to formulate them into a table.

Table 5

*Themes Established from the Second Cycle Codes*

Code	Significant Statements	Formulated Meaning/RQ No
Negative Emotion	<p>Negative effects of a toxic leader stay with you for a long time.</p> <p>The effects of the toxic leader trickle down to harm the entire team or organization.</p>	All personnel are negatively affected by the emotional upheaval of the toxic leader/ RQ1 & 3
Human Resource Support	<p>It helps to discuss the issue with senior management if they support the actions and recommendations of human resource personnel.</p> <p>Human resource must react responsibly in an attempt to keep morale up by acting as a counselor of sorts, to prevent as many employees as possible from leaving the company.</p>	Human resource is the first identifier of toxic leader outside the work group and must convince senior management that toxicity is present/RQ1 & 3
Negative Consequences	<p>Sometimes subordinates will leave anyway, and do not want to deal with a toxic leader.</p> <p>The negative effects must be dealt with quickly to lessen harm done, or the toxic leader's negative behavior will continue.</p> <p>The toxic leader destroys process, has no people skills, and harms the organization overall.</p>	Human resource managers remain very involved as a communication channel throughout the process, and experiences additional stress/RQ2

Remove the Toxic Leader	Even though the cost of removing the toxic leader may be well over \$50,000.00 it is better to severance out the toxic leader, and companies tend to do so.	Positive change requires cooperation and succinct coordination within senior management and human resource/RQ3
A New Era	Although companies are not able to identify a toxic leader when they are hiring for the leadership position, toxicity will evolve in a very short period of time and must be dealt with swiftly.	
Defining TL	New leadership that is optimistic, supportive, genuine, and communicates with the subordinates must be brought to heal the damage done by the toxic leader within the company. The new leadership often brings the needed change that will keep the organization operating.	The healing process for subordinates, teams, human resource, senior management, and the company requires time, significant effort, and commitment once the toxic leader is removed/RQ3
	The descriptions used by the 9 participants did fall within the terms provided by Schmidt (2008) in the definition of a toxic leader.	Identifying the toxic leader/RQ1

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### Qualitative Analysis: Third Cycle

The frequency of ideas produced by this round, and description of specific steps taken, encompassed what the human resource manager's experienced when managing the conflict produced by the toxic leader. An important factor of the analysis is to recognize the fact that these are human resource individuals, who have worked in the realm of human resources, can explain a shared experience, but may not have met each other. The reality of the phenomenon each human resource manager described is supported by validating through these confirming codes how each human resource manager feels

during the process of resolving conflict. Each participant was from a different division of the Los Angeles area basin of PIHRA, but all expressed similar patterns in their responses. This is important to note, because the participants interviewed separately, were not able to influence each other's responses. The significance of parallel experience supports and strengthens the results of the study. The similarity in pattern speaks to the significance of their life experience.

### **Defining a Process**

The strong common thread of experience described by these participants in the third cycle identifies the process of managing the negative conflict resulting from the control of the toxic leader. Participant described the steps they practice in communicating to senior management the issues affecting a department. More importantly though, each participant describes the emotional chaos the subordinates experience, the difficulty of trying to support the subordinate while representing the company, along with their own feelings of frustration in having to convince senior management the toxicity is serious enough to warrant action. Even when the senior manager is supportive, there is a slow process that must be tracked, and can create stress, frustration, disappointment, and anger for the team.

The toxic leader displays his, or her, own agenda rather than the company's process, thus creating team confusion. According to the participants, the toxic leader is bullying, even when communicating to the human resource personnel. The toxic leader displays narcissistic behavior, ignoring the human resource manager's requests and attempts at discussing the concerns of subordinates. The human resource manager must

then communicate the experience to senior management, and at times must convince the senior management the issues are serious. This occurs because the toxic leader displays the behavior of self-promoting. In the face of senior management, the toxic leader is knowledgeable, able to verbally promote them self, and convince senior management of their accomplishments. Senior management does not witness the abusive or unpredictable behavior that the subordinates witness.

Several participants, as displayed below in the narrative of each participant, had periods of feeling overwhelmed at the experience, frustrated at the slow reactions and decisions of senior management, even when it seemed apparent to human resource personnel that the toxic leader needed to be released. The reasons for senior management not releasing the toxic leader immediately are discussed within the narrative of each participant. Within that narrative are descriptive comments on emotions experienced by the human resource manager.

RQ1 is demonstrated here as a process or plan for managing the toxic leader. This process identifies the toxic leader, establishes a method for discussing toxicity with senior management, and moves toward managing or removing the toxic leader. According to the participants, the emotions range from dull or numb disbelief of the issue, to a voice of concern, deep empathy for the subordinate, the company, and confusion from the objective and directions received from senior management. When subordinates complain about certain behavior the human resource individual is still required to follow a specific process, even when empathy or sympathy feels like the right action. A specific procedure has to be followed in order to protect the rights of all parties

and the organization as a whole. Employees are dealt with respect, with open communication, and a receptive ear. It is important to cause the subordinate to believe they can trust the process. The participants state that the toxic leader is identified by employees leaving the company; due to their own emotional strain from working as a subordinate to the toxic leader. A common thread from the participant's comments yields a definite pattern of perspective and perception by the human resource individual, and is examined in the Research Results portion of this dissertation.

The repeated process identified within examination of the third cycle codes establishes a pattern used to manage the toxic leader. According to Saldana, "One of the coder's primary goals is to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data" (2009, p. 5). There are six steps that emerged from the third cycle that are identified and labeled as the process for managing the toxic leader. The following process was described by all the participants who identified the steps.

The process, as identified through the third cycle, and related to the research questions, is as follows:

1. Encounter/Event—there must be an event where toxicity is exposed or becomes evident by employees complaining or leaving the company, filing a worker's compensation action, acting as a whistleblower (Participant 2, para. 5), or observing a toxic leader who over steps boundaries of control and power. RQ1 identifying a toxic leader.

2. Toxic Leader Behavior—the 5 behaviors or characteristics identified by Schmidt do appear: narcissistic, authoritarian, abusive, self-promoting, and being unpredictable. Unpredictable would be actions the toxic leader takes or shows that may not make sense to the recipient or appear to be out of sequence in a logical process. The human resource manager or subordinate never really knows how the toxic leader will act in any given situation. RQ1, RQ2, RQ3—displayed throughout the process.

3. Toxic Leader Episode—a discussion takes place with the toxic leader and he/she adheres to the discussion, is given a written performance agreement that creates accountability, leaves, or displays worsened behavior. A toxic leader episode would be an event wherein human resource personnel receive enough subordinate complaints to confirm toxicity is evident, employees leave the company in an excessive amount (Example: 26 employees leaving within a one quarter period shared by Participant 5), or a complaint filed by a subordinate within the department. RQ2 and RQ3 behaviors displayed throughout the process.

4. Identifying Process – represents the interview and discovery process where human resource personnel discuss the actions with all who were involved in the conflict. RQ1 and RQ2

5. Hierarchical Role or Support – senior management may be a good support, or may not. If senior management is the toxic leader they will not support the human resource personnel. If senior management is intimidated by the toxic leader, he or she will not act responsibly. If senior management is strong, supportive leader, the human

resource manager will have the backup they need to address the toxicity. RQ2 and RQ3 this is required to resolve conflict with the toxic leader.

6. Emotion—the negative results stay with an individual, sometimes causing trauma. The emotional trauma would potentially cause a subordinate to file a worker's compensation claim, leave the company because he or she feels abandoned, rejected, abused, bullied, or emotionally traumatized to a point of fear of retaliation, fear of losing their job, or totally powerless. RQ3 managing the consequences of the conflict.

The human resource manage may feel and react from some of these destructive emotions through the process of managing the toxic leader. An elaboration of the emotions is provided in the results and matched to each RQ. These emotions characterize the experience of the human resource manager. The sixth element of emotion is used to understand the qualitative descriptions of *lumping* the codes (Saldana, 2009). Furthermore, these elements will describe the anxiety felt by human resource personnel when handling this type of conflict.

The code word of *emotion* is correspondingly being used to identify and examine the emotional upheaval and frustration human resource individuals experience as demonstrated by all nine participants. Qualitative analysis calls for reflection on respondent's way of thinking in order to fully comprehend the phenomenon. "Define your codes and rationalize your specific choices for the data" (Saldana, 2009, p. 35). An example of this appeared in the interview with Participant 1 wherein he stated, "That kind of interaction with a toxic leader is like a scary or something, like you know, a wound you look down on and say – oh I remember that dog that bit me – the kind of thing that

sticks with you and stays in the mind” (Participant 1, para.1). Of the nine participants, four submitted remarks of the same or similar influence and complexity of emotions remaining from the experience. From a phenomenological perspective, this is reflective of frequent experiences within human resource individuals.

The theme for the third cycle code identified that there is a method in place within multiple industries that follows the same pattern for causing accountability for the toxic leader. Toxic leadership actions are traceable, are documented, and these specific steps may be used to remove the toxic leader where necessary. Although the described process may appear to be similar steps taken for any employee write-up of poor work behavior the difference is dependent upon how the employee reacts to the write-up and the level or position of the employee being disciplined. The consequences that follow the position are more intense and severe dependent upon the level the employee has within the organization. As an example terminating a senior manager is more difficult than an administrative person because of the duties and responsibilities held by the position, the strength of decision-making power, the role of the employee and the dependence the organization has on that position, as well as that employee.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Requesting assistance from PIHRA, and being endorsed to complete the study, was a valuable tool to collect trustworthy information and volunteers. The endorsement by PIHRA to assist and allow the data collection is evidence that the issue is real. This organization, along with Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), is a part of maintaining communication in current laws, and educating for the HR Certification. As a

whole, the organization is a reputable association spoken highly of by human resource personnel, as well as organizations that support PIHRA. As professionals in this organization and trained professionals within this discipline their endorsement adds credibility to the research.

Anticipating the human resource participants to be available within two hours of each interview, however, turned out to be unrealistic. Schedule conflicts, operational delays in their busy work lives, and obtaining sufficient volunteers all were problematic. Phenomenological studies consist of 6 to 10 volunteers who respond to the interview questions (Chenail, 2011). This spectrum of interview participants reflects multiple ethnic diversities, various corporate atmospheres, with the common element of experience with a toxic leader, but is not enough to make generalizations except of their experience and does not establish saturation per se. However, it is adequate as the foundation for understanding the effect of a toxic leader on human resource professionals and is an attempt to capture the general approach of human resource managers to these situations.

The responses provided by this pool of participants represent original accounts of the perspective of human resource personnel. “The composite of the interview …serve to partially triangulate the …results” (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 239). Content analysis, as defined by Saldana (2009) is completed for trustworthiness, as well as deepening descriptive analysis. Together this information shows an apparent commonality of procedure, and is representative of the steps human resource managers take in the entire conflict process. The triangulations of respondent comments being persuasive in degree, and repetitive in quality, demonstrate the substance of reality in this form of conflict.

Since this is knowledge gained through those who perform the functions of human resource management there is a higher degree of trustworthiness in the gathered data than non-human resource person's concept of working with a toxic leader. Specific examples to demonstrate the trustworthiness are provided in the results section of this study.

A cross-reference and general remark made by all participants except for Participant 2 was that toxicity emerges within a company rather than senior management looking for and hiring a toxic leader type. In the case of Participant 2 the toxic leader was transferred in a merger. Events within the organization over time bring out the actions and behaviors of the toxic leader to create employee's dissatisfaction and the desire to leave the company. Another widespread remark made by all participants except Participants 5 and 6 was that the behavior is discussed with the toxic leader. Human resource managers and senior management together meet with the toxic leader to have an open discussion regarding their actions. This provides the toxic leader an opportunity to address their choice of action, and supports the company in the event the toxic leader decides to file an Unlawful Termination suit. The interview questions being used were successful in opening up discussion with the participants, and were supportive in each participant response while they contemplated actions they take with a conscious perspective they may not have experienced before. The interview process knowingly provided these decisions, explanations, and the questions did not need any adjustments.

### **Credibility and Confirmability**

A comparison of participant responses will support the credibility and confirmability of the data collection, and is demonstrated in the Results section.

Credibility and confirmability is used to help to suspend the researcher's preconceived ideas on any study in order to allow the reader to see the participant's lived experience (Chenail, 2011). The interviewee is not a human resource professional, thus cannot interpret personal reflection within the human resource experience. An advantage to the cycle code method of analysis is that the first cycle includes scrutinizing the information into individual comments to cross-reference and link similar responses. This is jointly supported by a majority of the participant remarks, thus proving and supporting credibility.

Relevant expressions and statements made by the participants will aid in an understanding of their perceptions, and adds a rich color to the emotions involved in their experiences, as well as providing explicit description to comprehend the issues. Individual descriptions are listed below to enhance this understanding. Credibility is shown by the repeated responses by these human resource professionals that parallel each other.

Triangulation is a method of verifying a position of facts and supplying additional perspective of a viewpoint. Triangulation is supported by comparing other sources of data and the steps and actions human resource personnel perform with similar investigative actions other fields of society use to analyze toxic actions. Psychology is a field where an example of the investigative action is taken. As noted within Chapter 2, the literature of Levinson (1980) noted:

The work of pre-eminent students of leadership does not deal with leadership as a whole but only with a limited number of highly

circumscribed techniques with which to understand, predict, and guide executive behavior. (p. 498)

The human resource personnel perform the function of interviewing followers, confirming accusations by subordinates or others, and investigating actions of leadership to determine if there is toxicity, and the severity of toxicity. Levinson further explains that within psychology “Aggression in the form of a search for power has long characterized power-oriented organization structures whose hierarchical models have dominated our society” (1980, p. 499). Subordinates complain to the human resource manager that they often feel bullied into actions or inactions (Part. 2, Part. 6, & Part. 8). Within the field of psychology Menesini, Modena, and Tani (2009) quote Caprara, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, and De Leo (1997) as stating “bullies, tend to manifest externalizing symptoms, such as conduct problems, aggressiveness, and attention deficit and hyperactive disorders” (p. 116). Menesini et al. (2009) additionally explained, “they are emotionally and psychologically strong, and their problems are exclusively behavioral” (p. 116). The fields of psychology and business are not the only field of study that develops scales of measurement for leadership actions.

Within the military, the effect of leadership is without a doubt the forefront of organizational accountability, structure, hierarchical power, and leadership attitude. George (2009, 2011) performed an analysis of the military behavior and determined “positions of authority sometimes not only fail to meet our highest expectations but actually misuse their power over subordinates” (2009, p. 7). Even the educational field finds the process of evaluating performance and discovery of misconduct to be time

consuming, distracting, and a frustrating. Myer and Casile (2010) discussed the steps of documentation to determine whether or not the inappropriate actions of a leader are toxic, which include understanding and evaluating the credibility, lethality, and specificity of the toxic behavior as well as determining the importance of proper response to accountability for the toxic leader.

Organizations that lose employees due to the negative behavior of superiors can cost the organization in lost person-hours, lost productivity, tacit knowledge, and team support. A retail operation called Measure-X explains “calculating the cost of employee turnover can be quite involved and intimidating” ([measure-x.com](http://measure-x.com)). The replacing of subordinates can be expensive when subordinates leave due to toxic leaders. Regardless of the industry, an unproductive team frozen in fear, or caught up in chaos of uncertainty will be detrimental to the company. Too and Harvey (2012) stated that “Destructive leadership can have detrimental effects of productivity” (p. 175). Emotional trauma caused from toxic leadership will affect followers, damage the company, and even affect human resource managers in a fashion that may eventually bring the demise of the organization. Continued acceptance of such behavior may become the accepted norm of the company and chase away healthy behavior. Social learning theory “describe(s) how workplace incivility has the potential to spiral into increasingly aggressive behavior” (Boddy, 2013, p. 108). Group dynamic analysts have studied and recommended process of resolution for reinventing team atmospheres and team accountability. Some of the issues found within group dynamics and toxic leaders allude to “groups with more extroverted leaders are less effective due to heightened competition and conflict”

(Bendersky & Parlkh, 2013, p. 5). Bendersky and Parlkh discussed specifically toxic behavior where human resource personnel must then step in to identify the issues subordinates have with the leader, notify senior management of these issues, then proceed with the process of documentation and possibly termination.

All participants stated the first step to recognizing toxicity as an issue is that either: (a) employees begin leaving the company, or (b) there is an increase in multiple subordinate complaints within the department when managed by the toxic leader.

Additional signs of toxicity include employees filing worker's compensation claims for stress relief, increase in absenteeism, and a decrease in productivity. If a worker's compensation claim is filed against the company, the claims address the behavior of the supervisor as being abusive, bullying, highly inappropriate, or causing emotional stress and physical illness by the subordinate, as stated by all participants. The frequent reflection made by every participant supports the credibility of this.

Participants also mentioned that the toxic leader often destroys company processes and influence or attempt to replace the process with their own agenda. This repetitive comment supports credibility, validating the participant's belief that toxic leaders destroy process, team atmosphere, and cause emotional upheaval within organizations. Creswell (2009) stated the credibility, validity, and trustworthiness must be understood from the participant's position thus causing the responses to be believable. Every participant, except for Participant 1 and 4, also claimed the toxic leader will step on toes, ignore respective political channels of communication because the leader believes he/she does not need to. The toxic leader actions demonstrate through their

narcissistic attitude that it is unnecessary to confirm or communicate their agenda with senior management since they know what they are doing.

The significance of multiple comments within human resource individuals being so analogous is supportive of credibility for this study. Semi-structured interviews support phenomenological research by allowing the researcher to adjust questions as needed. The interview is aligned to discover the lived experience of the human resource manager and that experience includes specific steps they are required to take whether or not they are emotionally connected to the steps. The lived experience also includes a description of their thoughts, reflection of their emotions, and defining the phenomenon of working with the toxic leader. The toxic behavior did not only affect the teams, but permeated the organization. Participants stated that in most cases they found toxic leader's behavior to lack inspiration and encouragement, resulting in decreased motivation, productivity, and lack of purpose in their role. During the interview process, it became quite clear that discussions on toxic leadership are an extremely sensitive conversation for human resource personnel to be involved in. Using the interview questions allowed the participant to focus on specific experiences they had and formulate them into a story describing their involvement in the process. The participants also described how this phenomenon of toxic leadership affects followers and human resource personnel, creating anxiety, overly cautious behavior, introverted physical appearance, fearful demeanor, and defensiveness. These actions stem from the toxic behavior of the toxic leader, through the abusive demanding, and bullying fashion of the control, they exude.

## Transferability

In Chapter 2, the discussion included comments from Schyns and Hansbroughn (2010) wherein a toxic leader has short-term success in prior positions of employment. These findings create the belief by senior management that this leader will bring the knowledge needed to support and grow the company. Participants 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9 seemed to support this information by stating the toxic leader typically has valuable industry knowledge that senior management deems necessary to obtain. Meyer and Casile (2010) stated “Using these perspectives in a threat assessment allows for more systematical data collection and analysis, resulting in a more comprehensive identification of the risks associated with the recognized threat” (p. 59). Therefore, this supports the comments made by human resource personnel regarding identifying manageable methods of intervention for any potential conflict or litigation arising from the toxic leader. In order to develop an understanding of the common elements within the participants for managing the toxic leader, it makes sense to identify where similar patterned responses come from.

All participants except for Participant 2 stated toxicity emerges from employee complaints within an organization and is not a leadership style a company typically searches for. All participants stated they interview team members and subordinates to measure the damage once toxicity is identified. Participants 1, 4, 5, and 6 identified the agenda of a toxic leader as hidden and unknown at first, but recognized as poisonous once it develops. By comparing processes used within seven of the nine participants the six steps for managing a toxic leader were developed into a recognizable plan of action.

In addition to the sample of comments made by each participant, the third cycle coding provided a theme for how to remove the toxic leader that resulted in a six-step plan used to remove any toxic leader. This process is a sample of their collective comments as a manageable method for handling the toxic conflict and is mentioned above with the third cycle codes.

The recommended six steps created from their comments can be used as a foundational method within any organization for identifying and managing a toxic leader. If a company is concerned about toxicity within their organization, these steps can be used to determine the viability of their apprehension. Transferability is suggested because of the homogeneity in responses, the ability to repeat this examination in any company, or other locale, and the fact that the ease with legitimacy of answers produced specific steps to a process. During the conversation with Participant 6 he discussed vehemently how frustrating it is to work with the toxic leader when this leader has his or her own agenda for establishing company procedure, especially when it is not communicated to others and offends members of the team. Participant 1 stated that when she realized the toxic leader was acting within his own power, and lacked authority, she immediately notified the corporate office on the east coast with concerns of policy breach and broken contract promises.

Every single participant stated employees start to complain to human resource personnel about their leader when a toxic event occurs. This is then followed by interviews within the team to validate the difficulty that has transpired for the group, and the company. These situations that occur are identified as a toxic event within the six

steps of identifying toxicity. The human resource manager must then communicate to senior management their concerns affecting the teams and company. Transferability is further suggested since the results reflect that toxic leaders have a negative affect not only followers, but also others within the organization, or performance outcomes. Replication of interviewing human resource managers within other organizations, such as SHRM, other counties, states, and countries is recommended to demonstrate this. Using a variety in the participants makes a case for a general negative impact on organizations and is not specific to one industry, one culture, or one nationality. This is suggestive that toxic leadership is a widespread concern for all human resource personnel. It is worth considering that the process described within the third cycle code is a basis for approaching the problems of toxic leadership in other arenas.

### **Dependability**

By using Saldana's method of coding and themeing the data to analyze the cycle of comments, than cluster the concepts to create an understanding, dependability is supported. It is clear that each participant evidenced the behaviors and consequences arising from managing the toxic leader. Since all participants voiced such strong remarks for this behavior, it is possible to infer the study results were dependable in this area. The point of sufficiency for concepts and opinions provided by these participants was being repetitive in remarks. The evidence of multiple participants making the same or very similar comments produces saturation of ideas about this phenomenon. Saturation is the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the newly constructed theory (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Nine participants making

the same claim or comment supports the potential for saturation within these nine people, and imply that additional interviews may respond with similar comments. Because the parallels of the experience, emotions, and the observations held by the human resource participant matched consistently with the methods of managing the toxic leader this is a dependable study. Participants answering with similar values yet independent of each other provide “a coherent domain of knowledge” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 65) that supports dependability. Repeating codes, words, definitions, and rationale aligned the ideas and themes used by the human resource participants. A follow up study would be useful to determine if the experience of these nine participants represent the perception of majority of other human resource managers. Additional studies will also assist with determining whether others have more effective ways of removing toxic leaders at the first confirmation of their presence. These human resource managers seemed to have unique cases where suits and countersuits or negotiations wore on perpetuating an environment deemed unhealthy for their subordinates.

### **Research Results**

During the interview process, I listened to multiple people telling their stories and experiences of difficult conflict. According to the data collected the toxic leaders themselves are moody, express an attitude of entitlement, and are controlling. Yet, the emotions managed by human resource participants increased the layer of stress because the human resource managers were protecting their employees, their company, and themselves. During the interviews Participant 2 made five comments to support this, Participant 4 made five comments of the same fashion, Participant 6 made four comments

stating the human resource personnel must protect the organization and the employees, and Participant 5 and 7 both stated this three times. All participants identified similar patterns of emotional roller coasters, team debate, fearful concern, and reactive subordinates within the organization while they were completing discovery for the existence of the toxic leader. According to the participants their duty is to not only manage the toxic leader, but also it is to manage the entire relationship of subordinate productivity, interpersonal behavior, subordinate loyalty, and company loyalty, as well as senior management's commitment to right this wrong.

### **Results as Related to Current Literature**

Recent literature discusses the subject of leader toxicity (Kellerman, 2004, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Tepper, 2000, 2007) and shares the perspective of the subordinate on the issues of conflict that arise from the toxic leader. Sufficient evidence is available to clearly identify that toxic leaders exist, create troublesome commotion within organizations, and cause employees to leave a company (Bendersky & Parikh, 2013; Boddy, 2014). Chapter 2 of this dissertation includes major themes about the existence of abusive, bullying, toxic leaders. Kellerman (2008) and Lipman-Blumen (2005) wrote entire books on the subject of toxic leadership. Mueller (2012) completed a dissertation regarding toxic leaders in the army, and described a short history of the evolution of toxic leaders. Mueller established that toxic army leaders display the faults appearance of a vision that is in the best interest of the organization, but in reality has a hidden agenda, satisfies personal goals, and increases control over the followers.

The toxic leader manages to promote himself or herself to a position within any company that enables the narcissistic, authoritarian, abusive, self-promoting, and unpredictable behavior characteristic of the toxic leader. Through the research and analysis of discovering what a toxic leader is, the gap in literature is identified as knowledge regarding a process for resolving issues of conflict from the behaviors of the toxic leader. The stories of perspective from the position of human resource manager and senior manager are not found within the literature: that define the depth of perspective within organizational decision makers.

This is only one portion of the whole picture of toxic behavior. The remainder of the picture, and the gap in literature, is to identify what methods are available, and what methods are used by organizations to both discover and manage the toxic leader within the company. Discovering how organizations identify and manage the toxic leader was the goal and purpose of this research. Learning that the process of managing toxicity is based highly upon the human resource manager's ability to correctly identify the chaos is only a portion of the entire picture. This research study enables the reader to understand and visualize some of the difficulty with identifying and managing the toxic leader.

Additionally, this research explains why human resource personnel must have support from senior management in order to manage or even terminate the toxic leader. If senior management is not supporting the human resource personnel, then the human resource manager cannot call out accountability to the toxic leader. It takes a team of human resource managers and senior management to resolve these concerns, and to correct the consequence of hiring the toxic leader. Senior management must support

human resource managers, listen to the recommendations given by human resource personnel, and follow through with threats of discipline for the toxic leader.

There is value to leadership and organizations in quickly realizing when the new manager is toxic, or reveals behaviors that are abusive, narcissistic, authoritarian, self-promoting, and unpredictable. The value in this information acts as a guidance to divert potential negative consequences. This dissertation will provide new knowledge to fill the gap in literature. The research is explored to examine the collected data in order to understand the logical process established within companies, along with the lived experience of the human resource manager.

### **RQ1: Participant Responses for Identifying a Toxic Leader**

In order to identify specific issues of toxicity the human resource manager performs interviews with employees, coworkers, or others within the team or organization. Once this information is gathered human resource managers will share with senior management to decide and create a plan for the discipline of the toxic leader, coaching for the toxic leader, or removal of the toxic leader. The methods used by participants to handle toxic leadership were of a personal preference; commitment to the company they were employed by, type of industry, organizational setup, and senior leadership support. An example of this is the government employees. Participant 5 is employed within government agencies and expressed a more tolerant attitude toward the toxic leader. This individual seemed to believe the tolerance level was expected within the government agency since it is more difficult to terminate employees who are employed by the government. More proof, support, or backup than normal is required for

termination within these government agencies, so the toxic leader lasted a longer term than private industry.

**Participant 1.** Participant 1 stated identifying a toxic leader is a collective effort between human resource personnel, senior management, and the subordinates to work through the conflict created by a toxic leader. Companies do not try to identify toxic leaders specifically. The toxicity will evolve over a short period of time; less than 6 months. It is a typical standard to try and discuss with the toxic leader any negative behavior affecting the team. However, depending upon the severity of their narcissistic behavior they may or may not be open to discussing it or understanding it. More frequently toxic leaders are identified because an employee will file a workers' compensation claim for stress leave. This gets very expensive for the company and the employee will typically end up leaving anyway. Legal assistance is always used to address these issues. Toxic leaders always have their own agenda, and the toxic activity will repeat if it is not addressed quickly.

**Participant 2.** Participant 2 also stated it is a collective effort between management and human resource personnel to address the effects of the toxic leader. It is helpful to discuss the situation with senior management when toxicity is identified because employees begin leaving the company. When the company discovers a toxic leader they hire consultant coaches to assist with training the toxic leader in people skills. The human resource manager then has to become a cheerleader of sorts to keep up the subordinate's morale since the rumors are rampant and the negative effects will trickle down harming the organization's productivity. Toxic leaders have their own agenda, and

do not care how they harm company process. Participant 2 stated that typically the toxic leaders destroy processes, assume more authority than they should, and are not held accountable for their actions. This is what creates the toxic atmosphere. Occasionally senior management will at first allow the toxic leader free-reign to manage the department as he or she sees fit, only to discover the chaos and damage in the aftermath of conflict. Their toxic behaviors are identified through employee interviews. Although the toxic leaders typically are hired for their industry knowledge they do not self-identify their behavior as negative.

**Participant 4.** Participant 4 remarked that toxicity will evolve within the company rather than an intentional hiring of a toxic leader. Frequently the behavior is discussed with the toxic leader, although they resist acknowledging the behavior is negative. Significant discovery is required by human resource personnel to substantiate if the actions are negative, and the issues must be addressed immediately before the company processes are further disrupted. Toxic leaders have good industry knowledge, are intelligent people, but their inability to recognize how their actions harm the subordinates is what causes toxicity. The toxic leader will step on the toes of subordinates, coworkers, and senior management through bi-passing corporate policy, and company chain of command. This is one of several causes for the discussion between human resource personnel and senior management regarding terminating the toxic leader.

**Participant 5.** Participant 5 experienced the toxic leader when a merger affected their company. The toxic leader was retained after the merger because of his significant industry knowledge. There was no use in discussing this with senior management, as they

supported the toxic leader and would not acknowledge the toxic behavior or consequences. The toxicity specifically was recognized because employees started leaving the company after the merger. In one particular case they had a 25% loss of employees within one department over a period of 5 months. The company is a government agency. It is very difficult to terminate people, subordinates, or leaders, as the government agency requires such a heavy paperwork trail, and frequently board approval to make these changes. In this particular situation, the toxic leader was overstepping his authority and processing information without proper approval. Subordinates complained about his demands and human resource managers tried to convince senior management he needed to be terminated. However, in government agencies people have more protection and job security than in business. When he finally overstepped the boundaries with a board member, this was significant enough to cause senior management to consider terminating the toxic leader. When they discussed this with the toxic leader, he filed a suit against the government agency. The cost of resolution exceeded \$60,000, but they were successful in removing the toxic leader. This activity of toxicity within a company, and the authoritarian behavior of a toxic leader will repeat if it is not handled quickly. These actions of abuse negatively affect teams, atmosphere, and may have a domino effect within a company. In many cases, the senior management is the toxic leader, so there is nothing you can do but learn how to work with the leader. This is more frequently the case and toxic leaders will not go away. You have a choice to learn to work within the toxic atmosphere or just go get a different job.

**Participant 6.** Participant 6 acknowledged that toxicity emerges when employees begin exiting the company. In his case, the toxic leader is senior management. Participant 6 also labeled the situation a cultural norm. The business was passed from father to son. The son was arrogant, a know-it-all, and had never really run the business. The son was being allowed to make decisions because of his status in the family company, he was allowed to express his desire to control, and would appear as an authority, thus mishandled the treatment of employees. Recommendations for internal processes were met with disrespect and abusive treatment. Toxic leaders have their own agendas and will not respect the order of reporting, even when they are disciplined for such activity. The narcissistic behaviors come across as abusive to the employees. All you can do as the human resource manager is try to calm people down, to placate the parties when the top people are the toxic leaders. Employees can listen to complaints and sad stories, and know there is minimal that can be done to really change anything. At the same time, managers do not want to discourage workers and lose jobs. As a human resource representative you are trained to follow instructions and support the company. When human resource employees make recommendations, they are frequently met with more questions, requesting support for the claim, and reasons for the recommendations. Employees have to be ready for the unexpected as it is known how the senior executives will respond.

**Participant 7.** Participant 7 stated it is a collective effort to address the consequences of toxic leadership. Toxicity will be recognized by employees complaining, leaving the company, or filing a stress case with worker's compensation. The domino

effect of toxicity evolves from these employee complaints, and must be discussed with the toxic leader. It is the human resource manager's responsibility to act as the communicator between leadership and subordinate and keep morale positive, although it is difficult to do. Keeping morale positive is a part of the human resource department's responsibility and the difficult part is being politically correct in answering employee questions, complaints, fears, and anxieties that arises from the drama of the situation. The sooner the consequences are dealt with the better, which will lessen the company losses in the long run. Legal assistance or a third-party counselor is frequently used to mediate issues, or to *severance out* the toxic leader. The emotional effects of dealing with a toxic leader remain with you for several years. It is an emotional drain to manage, especially if you do not have the support of senior management. Toxic leaders have no people skills, have their own agenda, and will destroy company process in how they manage their teams. The best way to discover the entire damage done during the conflict is to take employee interviews.

**Participant 8.** Participant 8 shared the story of experiencing toxic leadership when new management was brought in to revolutionize the organization. When he was hired his toxic behavior was not known. The senior management and human resource manager worked toward removing this toxic leader for one year. The dollar costs were not specified since it was a confidential case, but were provided as an average well over \$50,000.00 plus or minus. Employees were leaving the company because they complained of abuse, or the toxic leader was terminating them because they questioned his authority. It was the human resource manager's responsibility to maintain some form

of monitoring, communication, and support for all departments and the senior management. The toxic leader's own agenda was very problematic because he would not follow the company's standard for operations. Since the company is so large and worth several million dollars there are multiple offices across the United States. Through conversations with the east coast office I discovered the east coast office was having a similar crisis of toxicity. When the toxic leader on the west coast connected with the east coast toxic leader the issue became more serious and the organization had to work toward defining behavior and finding ways to hold them both accountable. The toxic leader is a personality we need to learn to deal with because they are everywhere, in every company, industry, and always make their way to top leadership—as stated by the participant.

**Participant 9.** Participant 9 shared her experience of a toxic leader emerging from the ranks within the banking industry. This particular company merged with another bank and offered the toxic leader a promotion because of her knowledge, not knowing she was toxic. The company realized employees were transferring or leaving after about six months. The discovery began within the exit interviews as subordinates opened up about the behaviors and actions of the toxic leader. When the corporate senior management attempted to discuss the policies and procedures of their bank, the toxic leader saw the writing on the wall and filed suit against the bank. While the process of the legal action was ongoing the toxic leader continued to work for the bank. The lawyers stated to the senior management that if they terminated him immediately and did not keep him on it would appear to support his case against the bank. Therefore, the toxic leader was not terminated since legal recommended otherwise. Because of the hierarchical

demands and processes within the banking industry, and this particular bank, it took them 2.5 years to remove the toxic leader. The payout to the toxic leader was 18 months of salary, and waivers by the bank to protect his ability to obtain future employment. A full court process and legal assistance was required, and several of the human resource personnel had to be involved in the court proceedings. New leaders were brought in and were significant in assisting with identifying this toxic leader. They were also significant agents in the successful removal of the toxic leader.

### **Results Determined From Data**

As stated above, there were a total of 13 individuals who agreed to be interviewed in the beginning stages of collecting the data. However, four of those participants retracted their consent prior to our meeting. When asked what the concern or issue was that caused them to retract their interest they stated: “My boss is the toxic manager and I would be placing my job in jeopardy” (Participant 10). “This is a highly sensitive subject that could yield very negative consequences for me and I am just not comfortable discussing it” (Participant 11). “I really don’t want to speak on negative consequences in regards to my organization” (Participant 12). “If they found out I was talking about this I could lose my certification because the employee files and activity are of a confidential nature” (Participant 13). “We are still in the throes of this scenario and until I know the end result it would be a breach of confidentiality for me to discuss it” (Participant 13). In addition, it appeared to be a consensus that toxic leaders will not go away, and companies can only, and must, learn how to remove them or work around them.

During the interviews, there was a heightened emphasis in voice expression, adjusting of body language, and shifting of eyes from the nine participants. The participants stated they experienced an internal anxiety when discussing the subject of toxic leadership. Within the interviews of the nine participants, it became clear that the toxic leader is not identified until after he or she has been hired and is working for the company. Once a toxic leader is identified, the human resource manager remains very involved in the process of communicating the negative actions to senior management, while continuing to act in the capacity of intermediary between subordinate, toxic leader, and senior management.

Toxic leaders destroy team atmosphere (Reed, 2009), cause stress on subordinates (Selart & Johansen, 2011), and create long term chaos for companies, and yet they continue to be hired by organizations. “Actions of organizational leaders have implications not only for organizations and organizational members but also for organizational outsiders” (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013, p. 1310). There is strength in power (Vecchio, 1997) and it may be true that subordinates sometimes get languid and unproductive in their job performance. Senior management may believe a hard leader will change the atmosphere and increase productivity. This does not; however, support the inappropriate action of a toxic leader. Although the literature indicates that followers stay at their jobs, under the guise of a toxic leader, for financial reasons, or until they can no longer handle the abusive authoritarian (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), there is still no specific documentation to support the senior manager hiring of the toxic leader.

When I reached back out to all of the contacts for each district over a 3-week period I was unable to obtain additional volunteers. From a quantitative position, this would pose a real problem. Conversely, from a qualitative perspective I believe it speaks loudly to the concerns, wounded emotions, dilemmas, and frustration human resource personnel have with managing the toxic leader. The emotions of dealing with this toxic event pulls heavy on the minds of those involved, and the statement was made by several participants that dealing with the toxic leader is exhausting and overwhelming. The Data Analysis portion of this paper will synthesize specifics from the comments.

The results of the data are divided by research question with the related analysis following. Each research question reflects the human resource manager's perspective and is stated to uncover the essence of the experience.

**RQ1: ... What Processes and Methods do Human Resource Managers Use to Identify Toxic Leaders?**

*Human resource managers and senior managers are not aware of toxicity until subordinates begin complaining, leaving, or a pattern of negative events evolves within a department.*

It is clear that senior management and human resource personnel may not be aware they hired a toxic leader. The discovery of toxicity within a company evolves over time. Participant 2 was the only member who did not agree with this response because the toxic leader was hired in during a merger and immediately displayed toxic behaviors. According to five of the nine participants, unless subordinates complain, file a stress case, there is a noticeable decrease in productivity, or in some way employees rebel, the human

resource manager is unaware of the toxic leader's negative affects within the organization. Employees will leave the company, start substantial complaints about a toxic leader, or file a suit against the organization. Current literature also supports this finding as stated by Martinko, Sikora, and Harvey (2012) where their research suggests "followers may abandon an organization due to their perceived belief in the existence of abusive or toxic supervision" (Martinko, Sikora, & Harvey, 2012, as quoted by Maxwell, 2014, p. 20). Participant 4 was the only human resource manager stating they offer the 360 reviews of leaders by subordinates, peers, and bosses as a method of identifying a toxic leader. All participants did agree that interviews must take place once the toxic leader is identified. According to Participants 1, 4, 7, 8, And 9 the human resource department has to intervene and bring to the attention of senior management how the negative behavior of the toxic leader is distressing the company.

## **RQ2:What Processes and Methods do Human Resource Managers Use to Manage Toxic Leaders?**

*Human resource personnel must follow the same beginning process for all employees to determine what issue, if there is an issue, is occurring. With the toxic leader, the process changes when senior management is involved. Senior management may be hesitant to take action because the toxic leader typically displays the behavior of 'self-promotion' by informing senior management of what a great job they are doing and diverting the senior manager's attention from the toxic behavior.*

A clear path of progression was developed for managing the conflict, investigating the validity of complaints, and managing the actions of the toxic leader. "Identifying the determinants of work team process, innovation, and performance,

therefore, is fundamental to our understanding or organizational effectiveness" (O'Neill & Allen, 2014, p. 159). There are six-basic steps to a process that was synthesized from the comments of all nine participants. The steps are as follows.

1. There has to be an event—something happens to raise a concern regarding the reality of a toxic leader being present. Employees either: (a) complain, (b) exit, (c) or file a worker's compensation case in order to identify the toxic leader. Toxic leaders are not identified without an employee experiencing a heinous event that precipitates employees' actions.
2. Human resource individuals will then begin the interview process. They observe behavior, team performance, and nonverbal action within the department. Individual employees are asked to open up and share their complaints and opinions. Internal confidential surveys are performed in order to complete analyses on the leader. Other organizations will use legal aid and consultants to complete the interviews.
3. Once the information is gathered the human resource manager has to discuss the results with senior management. This can be a very delicate discussion if senior management is the toxic leader, or if the senior manager is intimidated by the toxic leader. Providing senior management is supportive of the human resource personnel a discussion with the senior management, the toxic leader, and a human resource representative together will take place. According to the participants the toxic leader will either contribute to the discussion, try to adjust their behavior, or get haughty and file a suit.

4. There are various options for addressing the negative behavior of the toxic leader. Performance agreements that insure accountability for the toxic leader may be put in place. Or, a third-party coach and consultant may be brought in to assist the toxic leader with adjusting their behavior. Senior management then holds them accountable for their actions.
5. These options often are not successful and the toxic leader takes legal action against the company. Alternatively, a process of negotiating a separation and severance pay to remove the toxic leader from the company begins.
6. Senior management does not necessarily want the toxic leader removed because they typically have significant industry knowledge in their respective field (Participants 3, 4, 6, 8, & 9). The self-promoting behavior of the toxic leader creates an impression of knowledge by the toxic leader for the senior manager. It is the behavior of intimidating, pressuring, forceful attitudes they display that creates fear in the human resource. Some results may come to fruition at the start of the toxic leader employment then within less than 6 months evolve into a toxic event. If change occurs, the toxic leader will remain employed with the company.

### **Participants Lived Experiences**

Selart and Johansen (2010) confirmed the lack of feedback from senior management produces an attitude of abandonment wherein the toxic leader may believe they have the right to manage the department in whatever way they believe necessary. Participant 2 described this by stating “This showed the managers below them that it

looks like they do not care, which resulted in a trickle-down effect. So, from there people started to just check out" (Participant 2). In other words people may show up to work, but are not motivated to work at their best performance level. This brings the real issue to a human resource manager and provides the evidence needed to discuss with senior management. Behaviors by the toxic leader bring negative results within the teams, the company, and even affect the bottom-line net income of the organization.

When human resource personnel discover the leader is toxic and contradiction is displayed between what original commitments were made by the toxic leader and what actions are displayed, human resource personnel must then attempt to manage the issue with the required standard processes of discovery. Because of the status of the toxic leader, the position in the company, and the fact that the human resource manager is subordinate to the toxic leader in many cases, this discovery creates anxiety, doubt, and internal confusion for them. The human resource department supports all managers and leaders within the company since they represent the organizational compliance of the human resource department. Their duty is to confirm that all employees follow laws, rules, regulations, and that all employees understand these rules.

A toxic event occurs and the human resource manager begins discovery in order to confirm the issue, and validate either the toxic leader's claim or the subordinate's claim of wrongdoing. During this period of discovery, the human resource manager has their own thoughts of confusion, worrisome emotions, and self-reflection on process, protection, truth, and evidential support. At first the human resource participants stated the initial investigation and subordinate interview was standard, simple, and they

anticipated the possibility of an angry employee who merely wanted to vent. However, as discovery continued working with the toxic leader became tense, they felt edgy, unsure, doubtful, and apprehensive. Addressing the toxic leader and bringing up the concerns of the subordinate made the toxic leader angry, defensive, belligerent, and rude. Follow-up conversations with the toxic leader were no more successful, and the participants stated that it was then they realized senior management must be brought into the arena of clarifying, controlling, and holding the toxic leader accountable for their actions.

Participants 5 and 6 stated there was very poor support from senior management when they presented the issues that arose. All other participants believed senior management to be supportive of human resource personnel, and immediately scheduled a conference to discuss the behavior with the toxic leader.

### **Example 1 of a Participant's Lived Experience**

Participants 2 and 3, both employed in the office supply industry reported a more family type work atmosphere that was less tolerant of the toxic leader. They displayed frustration and annoyance by defining the problems as a quality management issue where the toxic leader is not held accountable for actions taken. “The managers over the toxic leaders have the skill set to deal with this issue and must be the ones to hold the toxic leader accountable for their actions. If the senior management is supportive of the human resource personnel, then they will immediately request a meeting with the toxic leader to discuss their actions. But sometimes the senior manager doesn’t want to deal with the issue, is too busy to address the conflict, or does not understand the seriousness of the issue until it is too late and employees are quitting” (Participant 3). It was almost as if the

human resource personnel made the conflict personal, that the toxic leader would dare to disturb their family, or company, and were abhorred that the behavior continued for more than 5 months. The only solution in their opinion was to remove the toxic leader, even if a severance pay was determined as the tool for removal.

However, convincing senior management to hold the same belief was more difficult for some of the human resource people. Participant 2 was able to produce sufficient evidence from employee interviews, comments from both suppliers and sales people, and trend reports that displayed disturbing proof for senior management that this was a toxic event. Senior management was supportive and immediately called a meeting with the toxic leader. Participant 3, on the other hand, did not share the same or a similar experience. Participant 3 was not supported by senior management, and although stated the toxic event must be handled immediately—the quicker the better—senior management did not act quickly, and instead held off on confronting the behaviors of the toxic leader. The toxic event was escalated by employees in the department leaving the company in a noted quantity. The toxic leader was disrupting the company process and “stepped on the toes of others” (para. 2). Once an employee filed a worker’s compensation claim for stress relief the senior management had to take action and hold the toxic leader accountable for the negative behavior toward the subordinate.

### **Example 2 of a Lived Experience**

Participant 8 was anxious to speak with me and share her experience because she considered the discussion a healing process. She works for an Asian technology company that produces internationally with an office on both the east and west coast. Her position

was a recent promotion, which handed her the responsibility of managing the conflict created by the toxic leader. This was her first encounter with toxic leadership, and she stated that she found herself unprepared for the encounter. Her employment history with this company for 32 years was reflected in her exceptional devotion to the organization.

A new manager/leader had been recently hired by the corporate office to increase productivity and improve the functionality of process flow. In the beginning the new leader appeared to be merely evaluating everything, process, procedure, employee performance, and other standard areas of productivity. However, this toxic leader began criticizing employees openly, threatening tenured personnel with accusations about attitude, performance, knowledge, and general appearance. Participant 8 began receiving complaints about the new leader from employees who were with the company for many years, even decades. The complaints included comments that he was mistreating employees, had verbally accused and abused them, was not following procedure as they knew it to be, but did not share what his expectations were, thus the team members we were unable to manage work tasks, were not motivated to continue any performance. They were generally dissatisfied with the company choice for new leadership.

Although she realized there would be anticipated changes with a new leader, she found that within 6 weeks there had been four employees who decided to leave the company for other offers. This action concerned her here, so she contacted the human resource department on the east coast for advice and a recommendation on how to manage this conflict. The human resource personnel were supportive and made recommendations as to how to approach senior management to notify them of the

alarming departure of some very good employees, along with informing senior management there were other performance issues by this toxic leader that concerned her.

When the toxicity rose to a head she felt overwhelmed since this was the first time she was in charge of handling such a momentous occasion and related performance issues. Even though she had been in this position a significant amount of time, she knew she was unprepared for the turmoil that entered the company dynamics. The east coast human resource personnel recommended interviewing other employees, still with the company, and even calling some of those who left to see if they would consider elaborating on their experience. Shortly thereafter—approximately 3 weeks—two additional employees gave notice of their leaving the company, and at this point, she contacted senior management to alert them about her concerns. Senior management requested that she begin to document actions, complaints, and continue the route to discovery. Meanwhile, the west coast toxic leader had met the east coast toxic leader and news of the similar actions and behaviors by both toxic leaders began to surface. Both the east and west coast toxic leaders were described as displaying the five behaviors of narcissistic, authoritarian, abusive, self-promoting, and unpredictable actions. When the two of them conversed in joint corporate meetings, there suddenly was a race for power and control, yet at the same time they fed off each other's ideas and actions. Employees were leaving the company in significant numbers: a total of 12 people in the department left employment with the organization within the time it took to settle the conflict.

For Participant 8 the entire process from start to finish lasted 2 years. At the end of the 2 years, new leadership finally was hired to bring back the calm status of the

organization. When she reached out to me for the one and one-half hour interview, she stated this was her way of talking through the chaos. She said there was a “need to walk through the memory of the process, and bringing some sanity to what had occurred in her life” (Participant 8, para. 3). As she had been employed by this company for such a long time, and her actions showed dedication to the company, senior management believed there was credibility to the information she shared. Thus, when the toxic leader began to revise process to suit his personal agenda she was unprepared for the chaos that erupted. The events that occurred left her feeling completely unprepared for the severity of extreme conflict happening where she spent so much of her day. As a valued employee, committed to this organization, she was lost by senior management’s approval of control by this toxic leader and lack of accountability by this toxic leader. In fact, she called me a second time, one month later, and asked that I come to her home for a more personal discussion to share additional thoughts.

Her statements support the chaotic circumstances of more than one of the nine participants interviewed. The other participants interviewed described similar feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, disbelief at the arrogant actions of the toxic leader, and doubt about the support being given to reprimand the toxic leader. This type of anxiety a toxic leader can create, merely because of their attitude and toxic behavior, was enough to upset the regular flow of process and productivity. The experience left a painful memory stained in the mind. The hurtful confusion handling this type of conflict can create came across as draining for each of the participants. It is best said by Participant 2, “I had to assure the employees to believe in corporate and that there was a plan. I had to create the hope, be

the cheerleader within the company so people would keep working. We had to round up everyone and rally support to motivate them" (Participant 2, para. 7). Nevertheless, the job description of the human resource manager can demand this form of supportive action by those who chose this field of employment.

### **Participant's Perspective**

Other participants were equally descriptive of the chaos and emotional upheaval a toxic leader can create. Organizations are disrupted by narcissistic behavior, abusive actions, and authoritarian attitudes that cause subordinates to leave the company, or sever any emotional commitment they may have toward the organization. Participant 5 describes this by sharing,

Attrition causes a lot of problems, a series of unique problems. It is not just that you have vacancies and key leader positions missing, but our top boards of directors are hired by an outside consultant, and for our board of directors this is extremely problematic. (Participant 5, para. 3)

Participant 5 worked for an organization that utilized an employment agency to find individuals with specific skill sets. The organization had employed and lost good solid individuals with required knowledge for working within this industry because of toxic behaviors by leaders. This situation left few if any new personnel to fill the needed positions within the organization. The outside agency was unable to find new knowledgeable personnel for the needed positions and chose not to continue support for the organization because of this.

Although some of the participants had fewer years of work experience than others, a majority of the participants expressed the same feeling of overtiredness that toxicity and managing the toxic leader can produce. Participant interviewed displayed frustration, doubt, and confusion they felt as they managed the conflict of the toxic leader. Table 6 displays the emotions produced from each participant during the interview, as well as the range of emotions, and nonverbal physical responses demonstrated in each interview while discussing RQ1 through RQ3.

Table 6

*Emotional Responses of Participants*

Participant Number	Emotion	Behavior/ Display of Emotion
1	Thoughtful, hurt, angry, annoyance, straightforward, resolved.	Looked at me directly, then the ceiling, then scowled his face, shook his head, then looked back at me.
2	Happy, content, worried, frustrated, excitable, despair, disturbed, shocked, annoyed, hope, calm, sarcastic, suspicious, hope, joy, proud.	Smiling, eyes rolled, concern, storytelling, mimic, joking, undemanding, responsible, loud, smiling.
3	Unemotional, annoyed, irritable, calm.	Matter-of-fact, detached, sarcastic, shifting positions for comfort, then resolved.
4	Positive, cheerful, confident, happy.	Feels supported, positive open seating, issues resolved.
5	Sarcastic, calm, annoyed, irritated, proud.	Loud, confident, storytelling, back to confident, resolved.
6	Bitter, angry, frustrated, resentful, rejected.	Complaining, annoyed, taken advantage of, unsupported and unresolved.
7	Unemotional, happy, resolved.	Stating the facts, cheerleader, responsible, supported by resolution.
8	Disturbed, confused, shocked, unemotional, resolute, confident, calm.	Very emotional, thoughtful, reaching for the right words, eyes full of question, contemplative, finally peace.
9	Nervous, hesitant, happy, unsure, serious, fear, calm, confident.	Shift of eyes and hands, rolling eyes, squinting in confusion, wide eyed, and smiling with resolve.

The attitude and demeanor for each participant varied between those who felt relieved that resolution had occurred and those who felt bewildered, betrayed by senior management, or frustrated at the end result. Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9 discussed their experience as if they were storytelling. These participants were more animated, frustrated, and then expressed a resolved physical status. The demeanor shifted from

professional introductory stature, when we first met, to agitated and excited, while telling their story. Once the ending of the story was reached and resolution occurred for the participant and organization, the demeanor returned to a calm and relaxed position.

Participants 1, 7, and 8 had a more protective demeanor when the interview began. At first they were hesitant to share, waiting to discover what questions would be posed, protective of responses and the organization, as well as their job. As the discussion continued to unfold, these participants showed agitation in their demeanor, as if they were uncertain of the outcome. Those participants who experienced a good resolution to the toxic conflict—a termination of the toxic leader, and work-life returning to what they believed to be normal—expressed demeanors of resolve; a status of calm and comfort. Participant 6 was still mid-stream the conflict and was quite angry at senior management for what he believed poor choice to retrain the toxic leader rather than terminate the toxic leader. He stated multiple times that senior management must hold the toxic leader accountable for action, must act swiftly at the first sign of toxicity, and the sooner the better. This participant also shared that he had started looking for a new job himself because he was dissatisfied with the lack of accountability senior management placed upon the toxic leader.

The active physical responses of the participants displayed parallel emotional responses as well. The Participant 6 information from Table 6 was observed during the interview process and inserted within field notes taken during the sessions. Using the information collected, observations of non-verbal responses were noted. “Data are supposed to derive directly from observation: theories are supposed to account for,

explain, and predict these observation-based data" (Ericsson, 1984, 1993). During the analysis of the data these responses were analyzed in terms of their meanings. Each meaning was then given a concept, and mapped to the circumstance described by that participant. The voice inflection heard by the participants is also reflected in Table 6. The protocol for determining this was developed by taking significant field notes during the interviews. Those field notes were then loosely written on a paper using a bubble type flowchart. Similar comments, words, and concepts were connected by the bubble comments dependent upon words used by the participants, inflection in the voices, and the non-verbal actions shown during the interview. The emotions of each participant also represent the phenomenon of their lived experience. Table 6 below describes the participant's expressions beginning with RQ1 then continuing through RQ3.

The swing of emotion displayed by the nonverbal language of all participants demonstrates how the struggle of toxic leader conflict does affect even the human resource person who is personally removed from the situation. Each participant was deeply involved in the interviews, the discovery, and the management of the toxic leader. As stated by Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 9 it is necessary for human resource personnel to feel supported, to have the confidence of senior management and the organization behind them, or their job as cheerleader—motivating the employees onward to completing their tasks—cannot be performed with confidence.

The human resource support of the organization is equally demonstrated through the support shown by senior management. Participant 2 continuously commented, "We wanted everyone to come together, and you want to keep the main players, you want to

keep the business running, and you want to keep hiring good people" (Participant 2, para. 10). As she was describing the experience, she became loud and animated. She commented that experience was a roller coaster of emotions from shock, dismay, denial, to acceptance, defensiveness, and successful happiness. She also made the comment:

When you challenge somebody like that, who is so insecure they end up coming right back at you - with every insecurity they have, and throwing every card they can at you. It is very hard from a human resource manager's perspective to handle somebody who throws every card back at you. (Participant 2, para. 12)

Participant 2 was describing how the toxic leader challenged not only the human resource representative but also the corporate policy, corporate process for control, and the concept of whose agenda would be in charge. This toxic leader was the controller of the company and held high control over the transactions for the company. There was a lot of favoritism shown by this toxic leader to the staff who reported directly to her. She would approve budget increases of over budget expenses for certain items, and deny others that seemed more important to certain departments. She was also Chinese and would make sarcastic comments about her 'Chinglish' (the accent she had when speaking English). When senior management finally began holding her accountable for behaviors and unapproved actions, her claims and accusations began to flow. Negative comments were made about various department heads, accusations of fraudulent activity that was unfound, and unexplained increases in pay for the staff members she favored. The *cards* then represented the actions of challenge shown by the toxic leader against the human

resource manager and the corporate administrators who were requiring accountability on the part of the toxic leader.

Participant 4 was cheerful. He showed through his attitude that he believed in his company and felt supported by his direct report. His comment was, “All have to trust human resource. In this case they trust human resource because they trust me, because I have performed” (Participant 4, para.3). Meanwhile Participant 6 said, “HR is like a junior attorney for the company. We are there to protect them, make sure things are going great and protect the company. But at the same time you see all the dark things” (Participant 6, para. 5). Matching the emotions shown by these participants with the words clearly displays a range of emotions from contemplation, anxiety, confusion, doubt, and back to resolve—at least for those who have rectified with the toxic leader.

### **RQ 3: How do Human Resource Managers Handle the Ensuing Consequences?**

*The consequences are managed by using the specific steps within the human resource department process, with the support of senior management. Dependent upon the actions of the toxic leader, a performance agreement may be arranged, or an outside coach might be hired to work with the toxic leader. There are occasions when a suit arises between the organization and the toxic leader, at which time legal advice is obtained.*

Once subordinates were interviewed, and a discussion completed with senior management and the toxic leader, then the human resource manager has paperwork to complete. Documentation is required in order to protect the organization from a wrongful termination suit (Human Resourceci.org). “Documentation is in place, recommendations are made, recap in an e-mail. If it continues we sit with the leader one-on-one, writing up

an acknowledgement by each person" (Participant 4, para. 6). If the toxic leader is placed on a Performance Agreement, then it is a matter of tracking the performance and reporting to senior management. The time frame of a follow up with the toxic leader is documented within the agreement.

If the toxic leader does not track to the agreement, human resource personnel then must confirm approval with senior management as to what steps to take. A coach may be hired to work with the toxic leader on conflict issues, soft skills, and communication. Participant 6 defined a 2-year time where a coach was hired to work with the toxic leader and introduce new communication tools, along with new behavior. Participant 4 defined a situation where legal counsel was sought in order to assure protection for the organization, and move forward with removal of the toxic leader. Once the toxic leader was *severanced* (Participant 2) from the company, new leadership must work with human resource to heal the wounds and damage done to the team members, staff, and others involved. Participants verbally commented that some organizations—those who could afford the cost—would hire outside counselors, not employed with the company permanently and similar to grief counseling, would be available for anyone who felt the need to discuss and work through any emotional damage (Participants 2, 8, and 9).

As established within this chapter, specific anxiety and stress is demonstrated as the human resource manager works through the discovery and validity that the leader is toxic. Human resource personnel continue to support the senior management, as well as the subordinate, by how they communicate between the parties. A narrative within the data is provided to establish the consequences arising from working toward handling the

conflict, and creating accountability for the toxic leader. More frequently than not at this stage of any conflict the actions will end up as an attempt to retrain the toxic leader or terminate him or her. The study uncovers how the stress of collecting all the necessary information from the subordinates and sharing this with senior management can be overwhelming, disturbing, and emotionally overwhelming for the human resource manager, and is not successful without the positive support of senior management. Of the nine human resource managers interviewed, all stated they experienced at least one toxic leader who sued the organization at one time or another.

### **Summary**

The concept of this study was to explore the lived experiences of human resource personnel and how they identify and manage toxic leaders. This research attempted to fill the gap in this area, to determine how human resource personnel sense, manage, and remove toxic leaders. Chenail (2011) explained that “qualitative studies are most likely exploratory, naturalistic, subjective, inductive, ideographic, and descriptive/interpretive” (p. 1). This design for examination includes a thorough review of current literature, which mostly included remarks, studies, stories, and research from the subordinate point of view. A large discovery included the realization that missing information within literature included the human resource and senior manager’s point of view. Discussions within those interested in the effects of toxic leadership are opening new avenues of questions regarding senior management and organizational effects and attitudes about the toxic leader, but limited information from this point of view is available. A case analysis by Herring (2013) discussed the factors that render an organization to misbehave when

following the toxic leader. The HR Roundtable Review blog discusses how “Human resource professionals...must find strategies for recognizing, managing, and containing their own badly behaved executives” (tempositions.com, 2014). Kets de Vries (2014) described coaching techniques currently used to assist senior executives with dysfunctions that affect their work. However, there is limited information available to describe what senior management thinks, feels, or does to settle issues with the toxic leader. This lead to a discovery of the gap in literature with a charter set out to gain knowledge. The desired knowledge to obtain was a perspective of the human resource methods and practices for managing the toxic leader. A continuation of this knowledge will be the lived experience of senior management.

The process of identifying a toxic leader, managing a process of conflict, and handling the consequences after the negative effects are encountered was clearly defined within the chapter. A specific process has been identified, which appears as a consensus of each and every participant that could become a formalized tool for managing the toxic leader. Although the process for removal may appear similar to the standard process of removing any employee, the difference is related more to the discovery of negative effects of toxic leadership, understanding the experience from the standpoint of a human resource manager, and establishing there is damage to the organization. The financial strain and emotional trauma caused to the employees, human resource personnel, and sometimes even senior management needs more exploration, and there is more to discover regarding the organizational point of view. The evolution of toxicity is confirmed to be damaging, affecting employees, leaders, human resource personnel, and

the finances of any organization. The difficulty lies in getting the toxic leader to acknowledge their behavior, its destructiveness, and to decide to change to avoid the potential negative consequences.

If senior management does not fully comprehend the negative consequences of a toxic leader this type of leader may evolve again within the organization. All participants except for Participant 2 made the comment that toxicity from a leader emerges and cannot be recognized at the point of hiring. Toxic leaders are not hired specifically because they display negative behaviors. None of the participants were able to identify a tool to recognize the toxic behavior. Additionally, human resource laws protect interviewees against the personality tests that would identify the behavior traits. Therefore, there does not appear to currently be a tool of sorts to identify toxic leaders. Participants 1, 6, and 7 describe how the behavior of the toxic leader will continue to show up within the organization if controlled limits are not placed on the toxic leader. Senior management may be the toxic leader, or may want a controlling force to address languid employees, under producing teams, and subordinate who perform poorly. "The more senior the toxic person is in the organization, the more widely spread is the impact" (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013, p. 6). Corporate heads may think that hiring an overly strong personality is the correct way to address this type of problem, only to discover some months later that they have hired a toxic leader who will destroy company focus. When toxicity has risen to a point where subordinates are leaving in significant numbers that it is destroying company morale some organizations will hire outside third-party coaches to mediate the behaviors and actions of all parties while others will rely on their

human resource departments to handle the matter. “The third element of the toxic triangle is the conducive environment which supports the toxic leaders to succeed in their personal agenda” (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014, p. 5). Accountability by the toxic leader to the senior management is a main factor in resolving the conflict and behavior of the toxic leader.

Participant 7 related an interesting observation from completing this study regarding the personality of the toxic leader.

It is important to try to hire people who are not toxic. Examine the behavior interviews, provide training with other supervisors. Talk about team culture and company culture, then set them free to future ongoing training and approach them on how to deal with issues. (Participant 7, para. 8)

Participant 7 as quoted above is sharing personal thoughts about goals when hiring and examining potential leaders. The above quote is taken from the discussion regarding how and if the human resource manager is able to get a sense of the leader's character during the interview process. Once this human resource person completes the hiring process the company requires the leader continue in ongoing training. The toxic leader may stall the process of ongoing training, but the company culture should encourage and demand continual learning. The toxic leader will not go away, and addressing the behavior of resistance to the culture of continual learning, encouraging behavior modification, while advocating the need to transform is not an easy task. Company culture will be changed positively or negatively depending upon the

accountability of staff, and of senior management, human resource personnel, and the toxic leader.

The timeframe from first request for volunteers to last request of volunteers was close to three months. In the event this action were to be replicated there would need to be a larger expansion of parameters to include other organizations involved with a human resource society, human resource learning and training, and to assure more volunteers for the interviews were acquired. A larger group of human resource personnel all at one time might be reached through other connections. Human resource personnel are resistant to discuss toxicity within the workplace because (a) they do not want to be perceived as criticizing their employer, (b) they do not want to take a chance of breaking confidentiality, and (c) they are uncomfortable with discussing it because of the memory of emotional trauma is recreated.

The results speak to the common themes, common codes, and paths of difficulty the human resource personnel experiences in managing the negative consequences of the toxic leader. The toxic leader often appears to be a team player, adaptable, pleasant, and anxious to assist in creating process for a department. Human resource personnel discovered that within less than six months conflict arises as employees begin to complain about their lack of consistency, unfair demands, abusive actions, bullying, and offensive behavior. The findings revealed in the analysis spoke to this difficulty and explained why human resource managers are so hesitant to share their experiences.

The quotes drawn from the participants define emotional disruption, while attempting to stay within the boundary of the job description and power of the human

resource manager. While observing, interviewing, and tracking the various responses I found the fear of personal exposure, as well as the emotional trauma both during the term of the toxic leader and during severance out of the toxic leader, turned out to be quite strenuous for the volunteers. The human resource person defined concern for their job description and licensed requirements of confidentiality toward the company.

Additionally, the human resource participants experienced a significant swing in emotion from dedication and loyalty to the company, care and concern for the subordinate, shock and dismay at the behavior of the toxic leader, and complete confusion for how the entire episode was allowed after the conflict surfaced. The demanding responsibility for acting as the communicator between the subordinates, senior management, and the teams is emotionally draining, according to Participants 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9. The act of having to convince senior management there is an issue to be addressed is difficult. Toxic leaders act in deceptive ways to control the teams toward their own agendas. Toxic leaders will pretend to be friends and support of both the human resource manager and senior leader until they decide control has been obtained. The narcissistic behavior shown by the toxic leader through the selfish acts they display that promote their power and authority defies the organization's culture, processes, and stability. The liability and exposure to the organization can sometimes be problematic within equal opportunity, equal employment laws that can lay heavy on the shoulders of the human resource manager within their job description.

Chapter 5 offers a final summary of the purpose of the study, an interpretation of the results and close with recommendations for further study. It will also provide current

advice drawn from human resource comments on managing the toxic leader,  
communicating with senior management regarding accountability for the toxic leader,  
while supporting human resource personnel with a voice for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

As recently as January 2013, additional literature extended knowledge of the effects that destructive leadership has on the employee's work production and commitment to job satisfaction (Krasikova et al., 2013). Krasikova et al. (2013) showed that destructive leadership is inclusive of "volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intend to harm the leader's organization" (p. 1310). Toxic leadership is an expression of abusive, authoritarian, narcissistic self-promotion, and unpredictable behaviors that harm subordinates (Schmidt, 2008) and "incivility was associated with resource depletion, which in turn was associated with higher levels of burnout and turnover intentions" (Schmidt, 2014, p. 10). The existing literature had not, however, expressed the lived experience of human resource managers in their efforts to intervene and resolve conflicts created by toxic leaders. Self and Self (2014) expanded the discussion of unproductive employees and included employees who display toxic behaviors. Their research offered insight for organizations to consider by providing opportunities for employees to improve their behavior, process, and/or productivity or exit the company. Some of those insights included a corporate audit of job descriptions to clarify and confirm the performance requirements, practicing strategic performance reviews that offer opportunity for improvement where needed, documenting underperformance, and offering training, coaching, and employee assistance programs for counseling, if needed.

My intention for this study was to discover what the experience of human resource personnel regarding the conflict created by toxic leaders and the processes used to manage the conflict. Boddy (2012) shared that "Research into toxic leadership

personalities and counter-productive work behavior is scarce” (p. 107). This study was among the first steps toward closing the gap in literature while at the same time opening the door for further research into the organizational side of managing toxic leaders.

Chapter 5 is organized to summarize the key findings of this study. The significance, limitations, and implications of the study are all discussed in a manner that provides reflection on the overall experience by the human resource manager of discovering and managing the conflict created by the toxic leader. The chapter additionally provides an overview of the results and discusses conducting the research. Recommendations for future research projects in the realm of toxic leadership are given, along with a vision for positive social change. Positive social change will occur when organizations better identify toxic leaders and methods for managing them. Further research on the subject of managing conflicts created by toxic leaders and exploring the effectiveness of connection to organizational methods of mediating conflict will serve to further close the gap in the literature. Reflections on the experience of conducting the research study are provided at the end of the chapter.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings developed from this research confirmed that the toxic leader has a negative influence for any company if they are not managed or held accountable (Bond et al., 2010). The negative influence begins with the subordinates, spreads throughout the group and beyond, including to the human resource personnel who must mitigate the situation. Too and Harvey (2012) found that “destructive leadership can have detrimental effects on productivity, financial bottom-line, and employee morale. Yet, destructive

leadership is often misdiagnosed and/or mismanaged once identified in organizations” (p. 175). Several participants commented that there are lasting destructive impressions left with those involved even years after the toxic situation has passed. Based on recurring comments from all participants, the negative effect of working with a toxic leader causes rebounding concerns and anxiety for the remaining employees. The research suggested that both the human resource manager and subordinates maintain this common repercussion of hurt, discouragement, and confusion from the unpredictability and other behaviors of the toxic leader. Events of bullying, aggression, rude supervisory behavior, mixed messages that create undue blame for the employee, and outbursts of anger by the toxic leader are all experienced as hurtful or offensive or by subordinates (Tavanti, 2012; Wang & Jiang, 2014). These negative actions are reported and experienced by human resource personnel as well, and were discussed by Participants 1, 5, and 6. As an example of the trends, Boddy (2012) stated that when a corporate psychopath is present the bullying behavior “occurs approximately 1.6 times per week” versus incidents that occur where no corporate psychopath exists “occurs about once every 4 weeks” (p. 116). According to Boddy, conflict and bullying are concerns correlated with counterproductive work behavior and have characteristics of corporate psychopathic behavior.

### **Findings of This Study Reinforce the Literature**

Articles written as early as 2010 through 2014 continue to quote Lipman-Blumen (2005), Kellerman (2008), and Tepper (2000) as the supporting seminal research for the existence of toxic leadership and for identifying and labeling what behaviors the toxic

leader displays. With new definitions and expansions on the subject, researchers have continued to discuss the follower's perspective. Both Pellitier (2010) and Tepper (2011) discussed the bullying of the toxic leader and victimization of the subordinate. Yagil and Luria (2010) discussed the effect of social relationships when a low-safety climate is evident within a company. "When a climate is low, employees may believe that they are expected to sacrifice various aspects of their own well-being for the sake of organizational goals related to successful performance" (Yagil & Luria, 2010, p. 728). The manifestation of physical symptoms, such as stress-related external symptoms, signs of depression, and nonverbal expressions of stress reaction by the follower when delivering quality performance under a toxic leader, will cause staff to cut corners on productivity in order to satisfy the toxic leader in hopes of winning a favored response from the superior or avoid an unpleasant one. This ultimately results in less than quality product, low performance, and employees desire to exit the company, as stated by all nine participants.

Literature indicated that subordinates find the toxic leader difficult enough to work with that they prefer to leave the company for another job opportunity rather than learning to work with the toxic leader. Martinko, et al. (2012) confirmed that the followers will abandon the company due to their perceived belief in the existence of an abusive or toxic leader. Current researchers established the subordinates' perspectives of working under a toxic leader, the difficulties and emotional trauma they experience, and the consequences followers endure when working under a toxic leader. Recent studies, such as those by Bal et al. (2010) and Mossholder, et al. (2011)—which supported the

existence of toxic leadership—established the negative consequences organizations have when conflict arises from the loss of employees. Bal et al. (2010) discussed authoritarianism in management and the effects this behavior has on rebellion by subordinates. Mossholder, et al. (2011) established the systems influence human resource managers have on addressing employee negative behavior that is destructive to the organization. This research adds to the literature by being the first to consider the perspective of the human resource manager in the conflict brought on by the behaviors of a toxic leader. Through my research into the area of toxic leadership, I helped narrow the gap in literature with respect to the lived experiences of human resource managers.

### **Extending Knowledge About Toxic Leadership**

This study on the human resource manager's perspective has extended knowledge by supporting, through interviews with human resource participants, that organizations do experience a phenomenon of abandonment through turnover from some followers. The human resource managers' consensus during the interviews confirmed the employee will leave the company, find a new job, or file a worker's compensation claim against the organization because of the toxic leader's toxic treatment.

Knowledge has been extended by learning the process used by companies for managing the conflict of the toxic leader. Using Saldana's (2009) method of examining first, second, and third cycle codes, and determining the progression of documentation reflects a common course taken by all participants. There was a specific pattern that emerged from the interviews that determined the use of a specific process within the industry of human resource personnel on managing the toxic leader.

The participants acknowledged that the beginning steps of the process for the toxic leader are similar to the basic steps in writing-up any employee for an infraction of workplace rules or expectations. The difference in process starts with a meeting held between the human resource representative, senior management, and the toxic leader. When a human resource manager discovers toxicity is a real concern, and senior management is brought into the situation, a conversation with the toxic leader may either develop animosity on the part of the toxic leader, or result in a performance agreement. The performance agreement may include coaching with an outside agent to raise awareness of the toxic leader on the negative consequences brought on by the toxic leader's behavior. This is when toxic tension begins for the human resource. All participants in the study acknowledged that tension, anxiety, fear, humiliation, and sometimes vindictive action on the part of the toxic leader are all displayed at this point.

Since the toxic leader will act in an unpredictable fashion the human resource manager may have difficulty controlling or managing the situation. Terminating the toxic leader, then, becomes more problematic though not impossible, and per the participants will lead to cost of outside consultants or legal aid in assisting with the conflict. The human resource person will prepare a performance agreement and then meet with the toxic leader and senior management to obtain signatures of acknowledgement. If human resource manager has to hire a consultant to coach the toxic leader, the toxic leader may behave resentfully, vindictively, or may act in a manner of complete compliance. The concern of human resource representative stated by the participants is whether or not this complacence is true or a temporary act. It is not until several weeks of coaching are

completed, or several weeks of discussion pass, that the true intentions of the toxic leader are discovered. If the toxic leader does not decide to sign the performance agreement, the toxic leader often will hire a lawyer and file suit against the company for a variety of reasons that only the toxic leader seems to understand or acknowledge. Senior management and the human resource manager together must then develop a plan for progressing forward toward either termination or severance pay.

Accountability is the most important, but last step within the process of managing the toxic leader, and is apparent within the human resource comments. An important recurring comment by Participants 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8 was that senior management must hold the toxic leader accountable for their actions, performance, treatment of subordinates, and handling of internal procedures within the organization. Krasikova, Green, and LeBreton noted “The actions of organizational leaders have implications not only for organizations and organizational members but also for the organizational outsiders” (2012, p. 1309). Only senior management is able to hold the toxic leader accountable for their action, and it must be acted upon immediately. “The failure of leadership to handle manageable conflict and dysfunctional behavior were failures in toxic detection and handling” (Goldman, 2008, p. 245). Participants 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8 specifically stated this was a major concern and continuing issue for their process of handling toxicity. The senior management either (a) did not know how to handle the toxic leader, (b) was busy and overwhelmed with the current workload, or (c) did not seem overly concerned until the employees began to leave the company. “Anderson and Pearson (1999) describe how workplace incivility has the potential to spiral into

increasingly aggressive behavior, thus establishing the important link between uncivil behavior like yelling and arguments and outright conflict" (as quoted in Boddy, 2013, p. 108). The "negative trickle-down effects of toxicity" (Part. 2, para. 5) erode teams, company performance, and employee attitudes. Accountability at an earlier stage will enable actions of damage control required by the human resource department.

The human resource personnel demonstrate they believe they are the motivating force to bind employees to performance and productivity when toxicity is inflamed. Multiple participants commented they act as a cheerleader to keep morale afloat. Although there is a fine line for the human resource manager to draw due to a loyalty to their superiors, their own job performance expectations, and to the company itself they act as a facilitating force for communication between the parties. If support for the subordinate is not provided the team, department, and organization will suffer. All participants within this discussion expressed this. Participants believe that human resource was the support for communication between the ranks, and was responsible for providing the flow of information between senior management and the teams. Participant 2, 4, and 6 provided specific examples of their employee interaction, developing trust between parties, and follow through with a plan for resolving toxic leader conflict being shared with the teams. These participants explained that they encouraged subordinates to meet with them at any time, reminded them of their open-door policy, and how they were available to discuss the emotions of employees if ever and whenever needed. These actions taken by the human resource personnel provided what Participant 2 referred to as *being the cheerleader*. During the interview with Participant 2 she shared how a the

corporation started to experience financial strain from loss of business due to what she considered negative influence in communications between the toxic leader and the customer base. The following year the employees were told there would be no raises. The toxic leader at the time was the CFO, and even without senior management approval, scheduled raises only for specific employees favored by the toxic leader. This created additional problems for the human resource manager and the company as a whole, further supporting the needed backup to terminate this toxic leader. The human resource manager, though, had to follow through on communicating with the other managers who heard of the incident, and had a lot of questions about this action.

Many of the employees, as told by Participant 2, were caught between the anger of what they believed unfair treatment, and confusion from a stated feeling of commitment to the company after a significant amount of years with the organization. Several of the other department managers believed they had rights to know why this happened, and how this happened, as well as what would be done to provide equal raises to all. By acting as a doorkeeper on information that could be shared with the subordinates the human resource manager was able to informed the teams of what information they could so employees might remain motivated, and the employment status of the subordinate might be retained.

### **Significance of the Study**

Positive social change along with increased knowledge of process and procedures are two of the benefits of this research. The camaraderie of human resource representatives will be able to compare their current procedure with the process supplied

in this review and engage or expand on the steps currently being used within their organization. Additionally, PIHRA may be able to use this information to prepare training tools for human resource members who have not had experiences with a toxic leader. Participant 8 shared she had never been through the experience before, as she was promoted right before the toxic event occurred. A corporate process, conflict resolution training, or a no tolerance policy would have been helpful information for her to manage the anxiety she felt, and the confusion she experienced while handling her company's situation.

### **Creating a Supportive Culture**

A supportive culture within an organization will enhance team development. Wherein, destructive leaders destroy harmony. Gelfand, Leslie, Keller, and de Dreu, (2012) completed a study on support for this claim by noting how the personality of a leader may determine its success. The research completed within this investigation provides significant evidence of this claim. Gelfand et al. supported the value and need for companies to confirm their leaders are in a supportive environment so communication and productivity is positive.

Crocker (2005) completed a study on managerial civility and developed a validating measurement scale. His study concluded, "perceptions of interactional injustice will positively correlate with the perceptions of managerial incivility" (p. 16). There is a clear relationship between the follower's perception of treatment by the toxic leader, which is discovered only by the employee interviews performed by a human resource manager, and the follower's commitment to the team. An open-door policy by

senior management may appear by some to be a solution. Nevertheless, without the trust of the subordinate the communication between the parties will not take place.

### **Revealing a Non-Supportive Culture**

Seven of the nine human resource participants within the study clearly indicated that toxic leaders would step on the toes of others, destroy processes, and display “no ability to work with others” (Participant 3, para. 3). Participants 4, 6, and 8 revealed their feelings of frustration at the senior management for not being supportive more quickly when toxicity appears, just as the literature reveals the subordinate does. The frustration lies in mixed thoughts between commitment to the company and concern or sympathy for the subordinate. The human resource personnel have the departmental position of protecting and supporting the organization’s liability. The toxic leader has brought conflict and complications in their ability to address any concerns quickly. Goldman (2008) confirms that the extent of conflict within an organization is determined by how quickly senior management attends to the negative implications of the issues brought on by the toxic leader. Too and Harvey (2012) said, “what can be predicted is that some form of dysfunctional behavior has a higher probability of occurring in toxic physical environments” (p. 173-174). Senior managers must hold the toxic leader accountable for their behavior, and combat the toxic leader’s actions toward creating their own agendas. Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) confirmed the negative leadership behaviors attributed to toxic leadership is harmful and abusive. This difficulty contributes to the human resource manager’s frustration and difficulty with managing the conflict.

Additionally, Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) confirmed:

There is an increase in the studies investigating harmful behaviors and these negative behaviors are classified by various researchers into different domains such as abusive, tyrannical, destructive, bullying, unethical or bad, and toxic. (p. 3)

The organizational side of toxic leadership is yet to be uncovered, and the perspective of human resource managers described in this study provides a step toward more transparency for organizations. Some organizations as a whole may be toxic. For example, Participant 6 acknowledged that the owners as senior executives within the organization he worked for were the toxic leaders. He shared how this created an entire organization filled with toxicity where nobody was immune to the negative effects. A specific story he shared by Participant 6 was how senior management who were the toxic leader would give contradictory instructions, then yell at the employee for doing what they were instructed. The toxic leader would say to employees that they had no idea what they were doing, that they were only in the organization for a paycheck so were expected to work for that paycheck, and that every employee is replaceable while speaking disrespectfully to the employees. According to his statement those employees remaining within the company for long periods of time displayed highly dysfunctional personality traits, which continued to in-breed toxic acceptance. This participant also was diligently looking for a new job himself. The organizational side of toxic leadership, I believe, would include understanding how these companies continue operating within the toxic environment, and continue to be successful – if they are successful.

### **Managing the Conflict of the Toxic Leader**

The viewpoint of the human resource personnel is discovered through the various stories told regarding the phenomenon of working with a toxic leader. The findings fully support the conceptual framework stated in Chapter 1 by collecting, reviewing, and labeling toxic leadership behaviors from the human resource manager's perspective against the contextual understanding of toxic leadership. The stories and experiences of human resource managers who have worked with toxic leaders were collected. This is a primary assemblage of human resource information about what is known and what is not known in relation to processes of intervention when resolving conflict created by the toxic leader. Chapter 4 develops the findings and analyzes the results of the interviews with human resource managers. The findings establish the process, but also discuss the emotional experience that human resource representatives deal with while managing the toxic leader. The challenge for future research is to establish and develop programs to assist human resource department with mediating methods to resolve conflicts, while helping them to understand the personality of the toxic leader. A deeper understanding of the toxic leader will enable human resource personnel and senior management personnel create a clear understanding of how to manage the toxic environment. Knowledge is extended by introducing new data, found awareness, as well as a deeper consideration of what human resource personnel go through when managing the conflicts created by the toxic leader.

I was a subordinate negatively affected by a toxic leader, which caused me grief for several years. The actions of senior management did not show their desire to change

the situation and bring about positive change. I did not understand why the organization continued to allow the toxic leader to destroy teams through the behaviors, actions, and overriding politics being displayed. With an understanding of the systems human resource personnel must follow, and realizing the affect the toxic leader can have on both human resource manager and senior management, I now understand that removal of the toxic leader is far more difficult than the average subordinate can comprehend. Between the labor laws in place, the interview and write up process human resource personnel must follow, the process of removing a toxic leader is slow and difficult. Additionally, the behaviors of self-promotion and unpredictability displayed by a toxic leader cause human resource managers more problems in convincing senior management the extent of the harm to subordinates and the company as a whole. The participants explained their concerns over how the toxic leader can be so deceptive that a decision for terminating the toxic leader may not be made quickly. The participants also frequently stated that if senior management does not hold the toxic leader accountable for actions they take then human resource personnel cannot change the situation.

Although there may be some companies that prefer to operate in toxicity, as a continuum, literature supports that most companies do not. The available literature on positive leadership, servant leadership, positive power in leadership written by such authors as Covey (1996, 2008, 2014), Du Pree (2004, 2009), Maxwell (2000, 2005, 2007, 2011), and Posner (2000) to name a few far outweighs support for maintaining toxic leadership. Companies affected by the negative behaviors of the toxic leader must first acknowledge the negative consequences of the toxicity, and then continue the process

required to remove the toxic leader. Without the team support between human resource personnel and senior management, this is a difficult procedure to accomplish.

This study supports the current literature by confirming any company may be affected by a toxic leader. The findings discuss some of the negative effects the human resource manager must manage caused by the actions of the toxic leader. The results show that senior management must acknowledge the existence of toxicity, and support the process human resource personnel practice when managing the toxic leader. The participants shared a common belief that senior management is the responsible party to establish accountability for the toxic leader. Reed and Bullis (2009) completed research on military and civilian interaction on base with leadership and determined “that destructive leadership is as prevalent as it is due to lack of self-awareness on the part of supervisor, or an inability to discern the organizational level long-term impact to such behavior” (p. 13). Schmidt (2014) completed a secondary study on toxic leadership and identified that “resource depletion was connected with negative outcomes and can be caused by incivility” (p. 10). These finding are supported by the consensus of the human resource participants interviewed within this study. Participants 1, 4, 5, and 6 stated the toxic leader is unable to self-identify their toxic behavior, which was a statement made by several participants to be part of the issue.

According to the participants, the behaviors of the toxic leader appear after they have been hired and the destructive attitudes start to appear around 5 months. As explained by the participants, the toxic leader frequently displays attitudes of power, creates their own corporate agendas, and generates the destructive atmosphere that

produces resource depletion and a toxic workplace. Discovering through the experience of human resource participants how the toxic leader is completely impractical toward acknowledging their narcissistic, destructive, authoritarian actions, and that they are inept in the soft skills of communication is in line with, and further supports, current literature. This is significant because human resource managers confirmed that retaliatory behavior of employees toward the organization may appear within the company in the form of “sabotaging operations, providing inaccurate or misleading information, and withholding help when a coworker has asked for assistance” (Pelletier, 2010, p. 377). The information provided within this research further extends current knowledge by filling the gap regarding the human resource manager’s perspective on toxic leadership. The study allows human resource personnel an opportunity to acknowledge toxic behavior, and confidentially suggest that the concerns, problems, troubles, and conflict caused by the toxic leader may be more significant than recent literature suggests. The findings in Chapter 4 establish that the emotions of both the subordinate and human resource managers are affected by the toxic leader. A significant loss of employees occurs before the toxicity is identified, and the situation has the potential to place significant financial strain on companies.

Human nature will always create some form of disputes and conflict, and skill sets to overcome disputes are essential. Some of the tools for resolution are being applied to the area of the toxic leader’s actions. During the training of a court mediator there are specific steps used to practice the skill of mediation. Those skills are enhanced by developing listening tools, confirming the perspective of each party in the dispute, and

learning the keys to a caucus discussion ([strausslawinstitute/pepperdine.edu](http://strausslawinstitute/pepperdine.edu)). Human resource participants within the study acknowledged the steps to identifying and managing a toxic leader include active listening while interviewing the subordinate, practicing the process of caucus by independently hearing what the parties represent as their position, and working with senior management to negotiate a peaceful resolution with the toxic leader. The process of caucusing is a tool used by mediators wherein the first meeting is a conference with all parties, then the following meetings are independently and individually held in order for both/all parties to “feel heard” (Participant 1, para.1). During a mediation process the mediator separates the parties then carries the message from one party to another, thus communicating more effectively and unemotionally. The steps to resolution may be transferred to any company. Human resource representatives would enhance their ability to support senior management in a resolution with the toxic leader through learning the skill set of mediation. Although mediation or any other method of communicating with the toxic leader is not a guarantee, this is a process the human resource managers identified during the interviews. The largest concern stated by the participants with any form of resolving toxic conflict is the unpredictability of the toxic leader. No one really knows, nor can predict, what behavior the toxic leader will display at any given time. By ingesting the new information provided within this research senior management and human resource personnel may be able to identify toxicity sooner and control the magnitude of chaos created when negative leadership abounds.

## Data Analysis for Research Questions

Data analysis consisted of reviewing and coding interpreting the interview responses. Qualitative analysis tends to be more painstaking, time consuming, and interpretive than quantitative analysis (Simon, 2011). Saturation is obtained as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 65). The research questions within the study were designed to explore the viewpoint of the human resource manager. Obtaining their perspective was successfully completed, and an understanding of their position has been made clearer. Chapter 4 includes a complete analysis of the research questions, the paralleled responses, and an explanation of coding. Saturation was reached among the nine participants as they established a uniform pattern of similar process steps and emotional experience. I recognize; however, that an expansion of this study by including a larger number of participants might uncover additional perspectives.

While completing this study, I reflected on the intensity of each participant, the inflection in voice and demonstrative nonverbal responses, and expressions from frustration to satisfaction. At the time of each interview, I concentrated on their intentions, reflections, and concerns. The formal discussion questions were only provided as a starting point for the interviews. Several of the questions encouraged storytelling, which became a better focus to understand the issues, similar to a word-picture. The word-picture process is used frequently within communication tools so that one individual can be placed into another’s point of view, thus feeling the full extent of the

message. It was gratifying to hear the remarks, be a part of the discussion, and to give the interviewees the attention to explain their positions.

The data gathered within the interviews provided the elaboration that I expected, with a few small variances. My original belief was that the toxic leader must be eliminated. Through the interview process completed within the study I soon realized the human resource personnel have a more difficult time terminating the toxic leader due to lack of senior management support, fear of a court battle with the toxic leader because of the lack of guaranty in support from senior management, and validation in the claim of the inappropriate behavior by the toxic leader. Subordinates are not anxious to be involved in claims against their leader. Although the behavior of the toxic leader is completely unacceptable and a plan for removal appears to be the most logical answer, I became consciously aware that human resource managers were claiming the only answer was to document the behavior and convince senior management to support them in the quest for their removal. The methods of the toxic leader are a serious issue. This is an issue that will not go away, so must be managed appropriately if the toxic leader inflicts harm and the organization must assume responsibility for his or her actions. The definition of appropriate for the human resource manager depends on the severity of the toxic issues, the support of senior management in the process, the length of time the toxic leader has worked for the company, and several other factors which could be a liability of the organization. Some of those liabilities may result in workers compensation claims, or filed law suits against the organization by a toxic leader.

Through the analysis of information gathered during the interviews it became very clear that the companies attempt to hold the toxic leader accountable for their behavior is not an easy task. The stories shared by the human resource participants revealed difficulty in a) identifying the leader as toxic, b) convincing senior management to aggressively take action quickly enough to lessen the damage done, c) limiting the time of employment by the toxic leader due to discovery and buy-in required by the decision makers. Designing the interview questions in order to assimilate the thoughts and ideas of the human resource personnel was an important part of this research study. The accumulation of their formulated ideas became fascinating to unravel as the toxic leader behavior continues to be a dilemma of great magnitude for organizations to grasp if the toxic leader is getting results.

### **Participant Responses**

The participants had differing emotional reaction to sharing their stories of the toxic leader experience. Some participants acknowledged the subordinate's pain when they told their side of the problem. A portion of the participants shared how they were shocked, stunned, and confused during the discovery of the toxic leader. A majority of the participants only knew how to handle this because of either a prior experience with a toxic organization, or drawing from psychology courses they had taken.

The human resource participants who had less experience with a toxic leader displayed more non-verbal behavior; was more excited, more anxious, and less instructional. Participants 1 through 6 stated their senior management was the toxic leader at some point in their careers. Therefore, they needed to learn how to deal with the

behaviors or find a different job. Participants 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 stated discussing the behavior with senior management did not make sense, as it would not bring change to the organization unless new management would be brought into the discussions. The toxic leader currently in placed was able to display self-promoting behavior that kept senior management from realizing the true toxic actions of the toxic leader. Human resource participants stated they witnessed the toxic leader in meetings where he or she appeared to be compliant, supportive, and a team player. When the toxic leader left the meeting that individual would continue to act on their own agenda terms regardless of what was agreed to in the meeting. The only resolution, they believed, was to find a way to mediate with senior management on performance issues. Discovery on the perspective of human resource personnel may be the foundational information to broaden the perspective of senior management, and can be built upon to further the understanding of toxic leader behavior. Senior management must open their viewpoint, expand their knowledge, and learn better methods of resolving conflict. Everyone would benefit in developing conflict resolution strategies.

According to the participants, when senior management supports the human resource manager and agrees to bring in legal assistance, or a coach, the department will feel supported and the subordinates see immediate action. Even if the coaching for the toxic leader does not yield positive results, the act of reaching out for support still sends a positive message to human resource representatives and team members that senior management acknowledges there is an issue and is taking action. In order to eliminate

frustrations of subordinates and human resource managers, providing evidence of some positive action by senior management is essential.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitation of volunteers was a hurdle to scale, although phenomenological studies are acceptable with a participant number of six to ten (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Norvell, Northcutt, & McCoy, 2004). The original proposal anticipated a collection of 20 participants, and was adjusted by necessity and resulted in a total of nine interviews. The fear and hesitation displayed by the volunteers became a limitation, although each individual was assured confidentiality. During the process of collecting volunteers it was explained that no names would be used when sharing the data or interviews, and the IRB process would be strictly adhered to. However, the human resource individuals still displayed inhibition with participating in the interviews. Comments within the participant who did respond clearly identified the hesitation was related to a concern over company breach of information.

Human resource personnel are held to strict structures of confidentiality within their job descriptions (hci.org), and although this was frustrating, I find it respectful they were so committed to the company and the position of a human resource manager. This similarity could be representative of a majority perspective from the human resource personnel. The data analysis is exploratory and does support the results and conclusions of this material.

The inability to interview the senior management who hires the toxic leader remains a limitation. However, it would be an interesting study to attempt. As discovered

within the interviews senior management does not typically set out to hire a toxic leader. Toxicity evolves within a short period of time. The consensus defines a timeframe of approximately 5 months after employment before the toxic leader shows signs of toxic behaviors. A fascinating follow up study would be the interviews with senior management. Reviewing what senior management does believe, perceive, and acknowledge regarding the toxic leader may shed further light on the dynamics at work. A follow up study of this type would also provide supplementary support for this study.

The lack of information in literature on human resource manager's procedures for managing toxic leaders continues to serve as a limitation. There is literature available to support the claim by human resource managers that employees complain and will leave a company because of a toxic leader. Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011) completed a study to measure and predict abusive supervision, deep-level dissimilarity, relationship conflict, and subordinate performance. Their study supports the opinion of a gap in literature by stating, "This research has helped explain why supervisors may be inclined to downward hostility in general, but little is known about the reasons supervisors abuse specific subordinates" (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011, p. 279). Several clues abound within the literature to confirm toxic leaders are problematic, and to imply senior management needs to hold them more accountable for their actions. Gelfand, Keller, Leslie, and de Dreu (2012) completed a study on cultures within organizations that create conflict. Their study determined subordinate burnout occurs when conflict is created by destructive leaders and leads to counterproductive work behavior. Gelfand et al. (2012) support the concept of creating collaborative cultures, which can only occur by understanding

dominant and avoidant organizational cultures. There remains insufficient literature to provide the perspective of the human resource manager. This study is a first to pierce the concerns, positions, and perspective of the human resource manager.

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

Within the research, it was assumed to be true that the human resource personnel involved in this study would be able to contribute to this study through their personal experiences with the toxic leader. The model provided for internal conflict resolution, a training of mediation and dispute resolution, or the hiring of a professional in-house mediator, was accepted by the participants as an idea that could create positive social change within organizations. All participants were able to state personal experiences, perspectives, and processes of managing the conflict created by a toxic leader would be assisted by an internal process described above. All participants were able to contribute ideas, and recommendations for a method of improving communications and accountability for the toxic leader. Interestingly they also supported the need for senior managers to accept more responsibility for holding the toxic leader accountable for their actions and behaviors.

An assumption was that the definition of a toxic leader as defined by Schmidt (2008) would be expanded on or confirmed. All participants confirmed this definition, and did not elaborate, expand, or negate the definition provided. There was agreement that all five behavior characteristics described by Schmidt (2008) needed to be present to identify a true toxic leader. The human resource participants noted that they were able to create a method to work around the conflict if only some of the behaviors appeared. The

bullying supervisor who was not identified as a true toxic leader, as an example, was more open to coaching, identifying areas of their managing style that need improvement, and were not resistant to change. Participant 2 chose the word cancerous as a word interchange for the use of toxic. However, there were no other recommendations or expansions on the definition by Schmidt. Therefore, it is assumed the working definition of a toxic leader would be the leader behaviors of narcissistic, abusive, authoritarian, self-promoting when it damages the team, and unpredictable.

There was also an assumption that this study would add valuable information on this subject and provide an impact to organizational methods for handling the chaos created by toxic leaders. The knowledge provided within this research is a stepping-stone toward closing the gap in literature on the human resource manager's perspective on toxic leadership. Further research as suggested within the recommendation will enhance knowledge, and allow for positive social change within organizations as improved conditions of employment evolve from this knowledge as long as toxic leaders are identified early and removed or reformed. If the organization establishes accountability for manager's actions at the forefront of employment, and acts quickly when toxicity begins to appear, the company employees will have better, psychologically safer environments, thus experiencing positive social change.

The limits of this study were specific to the perspective and perceptions of the human resource personnel. The research maintains a concentration specifically on the definition of the toxic leader, and how the human resource manager identifies, manages, and handles any consequences related to the conflict. Any remarks made by those

interviewed that were not related to the subject of toxic leadership were not included in the dissertation. There were limited remarks made regarding other subject matter, so it was not difficult to keep the interviews focused on toxicity. The participants were able to keep their comments on the subject and had enough information that provided support. Names of organizations, superiors, and participants are not included to protect the interviewee's confidentiality, as well as honor the guidelines of the IRB. Trust and confidence was established and maintained within the interviewees. The information provided by all human resource participants suggests ideas for further research projects.

### **Personal Reflection**

During my tenure with a toxic leader, it appeared that there was a lack of information flow between senior management to human resource manager to subordinate. This is what created my desire to understand toxic behavior among leaders. The behaviors of a toxic leader described by Schmidt (2008) of narcissistic, abusive, authoritarian, self-promoting, and unpredictable were all confirmed behaviors my team experienced. Originally, I believed more information was needed within the literature to understand the viewpoint of the subordinate. I thought there was and ought to be more power within the hands of the employee. I learned very quickly that this was not the case, and the company's process and procedures to make money, develop the organization, and manage change was the real controlling factor. Leaders are not necessarily hired as toxic managers. I am told by the human resource participants they are typically hired with the intent of bringing needed change to an organization, or to fill open positions within the staff. It is not until after the hiring, and the real work begins, that toxicity arises.

Literature supports the opinion that toxic leaders, once identified, can create havoc on industries, chaos in teams, and create unproductive work atmospheres for the subordinates (Bendersky & Parikh, 2013; Boddy, 2012; Kellerman, 2008; Krasikova, Green & LeBreton, 2013; Lipman-Blumen, 2004; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Schmidt, 2008; Tepper, 2007). It was at this point that I became more interested in understanding how the toxic leader can have such control over the subordinates.

The interviewer should be aware of their own bias, position, and comment on these biases. In my case, tenure of 2 years with a toxic leader became problematic after completing a Master's degree in Dispute Resolution. I had already completed a Master's in Organizational Leadership, and noticed a growing concern when a toxic leader was transferred from a different department to the one I was working in. My coworkers referred to her as 'the Terminator'. She was known for firing personnel without supportive evidence, or pushing productive personnel to a point of leaving the company. The issue was not that she pushed unproductive personnel into being productive. The issue was the manner in which she forced personnel to leave the company was destructive, authoritarian, narcissistic, and created fear within the department.

My bias, therefore, was already loaded with a negative viewpoint having experienced a toxic leader. As I continued through the analysis of the literature review on toxic leadership it became apparent that the results, implications, and concerns of researchers already documented the issues I was experiencing. The gap in literature became evident when I realized little to no informational data was available from the human resource perspective. The challenge became how to collect data from the human

resource without interfering in confidentiality, or invalidating their commitment to the various companies. When the idea of PIHRA became a reality I had hopes of obtaining more volunteers, although all data gathered is relevant, similar, repeating, and supportive of the final analysis provided within this discussion. I was surprised by the defensive physical stance portrayed by the human resource individuals at PIHRA. My sense was their resistance to discussing the experience was demonstrated as fear. These individuals were not willing to discuss the fear openly. Therefore, I did not know exactly the cause. Additional volunteers, I believe, would only further substantiate the existing information. I believe the data collected within this research is explainable and substantive of the human resources perspective on the toxic leader and extends knowledge on this subject.

### **Recommendations**

I would recommend a repeat of this study in other cities and towns to determine if what I identified here is generalizable. Informative collection of data, with a subsequent analysis, would confirm with human resource personnel that toxic leadership continues to be an issue of concern throughout other cities, states, and counties, and identify if others were affected more deeply by the actions and behaviors of toxic leaders, thus increase the findings. It is not likely that the results will be any different, and repeating this study in other areas would further support the findings. Enabling human resource organizations across the country to expand knowledge in this arena would also assist with training to prevent the hiring and perpetuation of toxic leaders.

Another follow up study that would be fascinating is to discover the origin of toxic leaders and how they succeed to higher organizational levels. Understanding what

creates the natural predisposition to status of leader, what creates the term Freud (1989) used of narcissistic tendency, and what causes them to be toxic rather than collaborative or mentoring is knowledge needed to broaden the spectrum within this subject. Followers who complain about their leaders, will leave a company because of a toxic leader, but there is limited literature or reference to a subordinate leaving because of a coworker. Human resource personnel are able to curtail negative behavior between subordinate and subordinate by the current processes in place, the company handbook, a write-up for policy correction, or a termination at-will. However, limited reports are available on engaging the toxic leader in processes to resolve conflicts between ranks.

Forthrightly, it would be difficult to complete such a study, as it is difficult to envision a toxic leader volunteering to be considered a negative force. I do not believe anyone would volunteer to be interviewed in order to discover how their negative behavior affects others. If such an interview were to take place it would require appealing to the narcissistic influence within the character of the toxic leader. Approaching them with the intent of elevating them, recognizing them for the industry knowledge they encompass, would be best way to interview them; although, only those undertones of personality could be reckoned with, and this would be an overly subjective position to interview from. Additionally, this may not be a straightforward approach thus not a recommendation. Since the toxic leader displays narcissistic tendencies appealing to them with honesty by asking their opinion on specific events would be the best method of approach. If the toxic leader happens to be the senior manager, it would be more difficult to obtain approval and support to interview them.

Companies as a whole, and human resource personnel, recommend using employee handbooks. Participants 1 and 3, and 4 each stated the value and importance of a solid handbook. It is an acceptable format to create a handbook with accountability limits of actions and behaviors for employees. Documented training and signed waivers by all employees, including management, would better protect an organization from the potential risk and liability encompassed with the toxic leader's behavior.

Since there is no pre-hiring mechanism to fully recognize a toxic leader, and human resource laws prevent personality tests being given without full knowledge of why the test is given, it is imperative any organization currently suffering from toxicity discover the proper methods for accountability between all parties. The senior management must be held responsible for holding the toxic leader accountable. Human resource personnel and senior management together should create a method for managing the toxic leader against actions that are not addressing issues at hand.

Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011) provided an interesting proposal for additional research. This proposal explains that perceived toxic leadership versus actual documented toxic leadership is difficult to identify when there is a leader who does not like or care for the personality of a subordinate. In other words, they have a personality conflict versus a toxic relationship. The leader and subordinate perceive life through very differing lenses. Tepper, Moss and Duffy said, "Specifically, we propose that the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision is indirect, operating through supervisor perceptions of relationship conflict and supervisor evaluations of subordinates' performance" (2011, p. 281). Their study entailed four hypotheses

regarding mediating perceptions of relationship conflict between supervisor and subordinate. This is a different study from what I am recommending. The first step the human resource manager takes to identify a toxic leader is to interview subordinates to confirm the reality of their claims of mistreatment, the degree of mistreatment, and whether it is just one subordinate or if there are others. Generally, it is feasible for any supervisor and subordinate to have difficulty in communication when their viewpoints or opinions are significantly different. The first step of interviewing will lead to determining the viability of toxicity.

### **Implications**

One implications of this study suggests the need for quicker response by senior management to the toxicity that is identified by human resource managers. Human resource departments have suggested a process, which it practiced throughout organizations represented in this study. To quote Participant 8, “Once I was able to provide evidence of bad, immoral, people complaining, lawsuits being filed, and what this was costing the company he was ready to approve release of the toxic manager” (para.8). Thus, a more immediate accountability for the toxic leader will provide support for the company to manage the negative consequences of conflict that occur from the toxic behavior. Moreover, demonstrating support for human resource manager from senior management by creating better communications, discussing conflict resolution tools, and updating the employee handbook to include consequences to toxic behavior is equally important in managing toxic situations.

## Potential Impact for Positive Social Change

The connection with positive social change is established by sharing knowledge and providing opportunity to understand how organizations deal with toxic leaders and how senior managers can improve the relationships among people at work. Positive social change is established by providing a method for minimizing toxicity in the workplace. In addition the impact of the toxic leader would be lessened by demonstrating the organization's intolerance to the toxic behavior.

## Human Resource Process Considerations

Recognizing a toxic situation within any organization and identifying a toxic leader can be controversial. The methods currently used by human resource departments identify the toxic leader after they are hired. Identifying a toxic leader pre-employment is not feasible, as established by the participants, because the law does not allow them to test for personality. The participants stated that the law only allows testing for job qualifications (Part. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7). Therefore, any support the company can create to further manage issues that arise would support the current processes in place. The processes currently established are commonly known as an employee write-up. Support would be creating additional methods for identifying and confirming the leader is toxic before significant damage occurs. This would provide additional evidence for human resource managers and senior management to take action sooner. The research demonstrated that human resource personnel need senior management to hold the toxic leader accountable for their actions. Human resource is a staff function so it must know the actions they recommend will be followed by senior management. According to the

participants their experience with senior management who did not support their recommendations resulted in a long period of toxicity, and financial strain on the organization. The policies and procedures written within the employee handbook are a bible for human resource personnel. This is the documented proof certain action will be taken because it is written clearly in the handbook, provided to all employees, and acted upon. “Having a good solid handbook gives you something to stand on” (Participant 1, para.9). Handbooks need to include statements regarding behaviors that negatively affect the organizations, and state the consequences for disruption, including termination. An example of such a sentence might read that if a leader causes proven emotional disruption within the company, and the result is a proven negative treatment of an employee, any form of bullying, or abusive treatment, or causes employees to leave the company at a significant rate, he or she could be terminated. Measurements might be included in the definition, but would be specific to that industry or organization. This statement, if included in the handbook, may show intent by the organization to hold employees accountable to a set of standards and values held to be important. If so, the toxic leader would have less of a case to dispute.

In other words by writing in the handbook, and demonstrating strict adherence to the standard that disruptive behavior is a cause for termination, a court of law would support a company that chose to terminate the toxic leader based on his or her action. The guidelines in a handbook could not be used as the only source for termination of a toxic leader. The guidelines if not adhered to are merely additional supporting evidence that an issue was created by the behaviors of the toxic leader. According to the participants in

this research the organization must establish a significant documentation of support in order to settle a case in court, if the toxic leader decides to sue. Written policies documented to be in place provide a portion of the support for a case.

Human resource personnel have systems in place to identify if a leader is truly creating problems or if a subordinate is claiming they have a bad manager because they have issues of poor performance. Although the controversial actions of the toxic leader cannot always be enumerated in a handbook, the boundaries of actions taken by an individual may be monitored through the use of the procedures provided within the handbook. Along with a statement of measurement for emotional or procedural disruption, the process for measuring and documenting the actions might be included in the description of the procedure. The written procedure will provide a method of documenting positive as well as negative actions of the toxic leader. This will then aid in determining if the leader's behaviors are toxic, and the subordinate has a valid complaint about the leader, or if the subordinate is simply claiming the leader is toxic.

Support may also be demonstrated through training for human resource manager and senior management, and perhaps even subordinates, on how to mediate conflict. Training in dispute resolution programs are currently offered by numerous universities, colleges, and consultants within today's society ([pepperdine.edu](http://pepperdine.edu)). Learning these tools to mediation and communication may provide an avenue for the less powerful, who may feel intimidated, to have a voice. The awareness of toxicity evolves through employee complaints, or employees leaving the company. Toxic environments have a domino effect on the subordinates which will negatively affect the financial bottom-line of the

company. As noted by Participant 4 the toxic leader frequently pursues his or her own agenda that destroys processes, while they “step on toes” (para. 5) in their communication methods. Legal assistance is regularly required to resolve suits, severance the toxic leader, while human resource managers claim to be the cheerleader holding up the flag of motivation for team players as they attempt to assure subordinates that positive change is coming.

Along with the toxic leader having his or her own agenda and destroying internal company procedure and technique there is an inability to self-identify the negative behavior they demonstrate. According to five of the nine participants, the toxic leader typically has significant industry knowledge, but they are lacking in sufficient soft people skills. A program should be implemented in the organization for communications and people skills management training as a mandatory program to both inform all managers, as well as protect the organization. Although this would not change any personalities, this would add the benefit of knowledge and understanding how to identify and work with varying personality types. The organization would be able to demonstrate to the court, in the case of a suit, that they provided employees with tools to manage the differing personalities. This action would also support the organization in a worker’s compensation claim. With the documentation of these training programs an organization could use this as backup for any termination of the toxic leader they may pursue. The human resource participants who experienced a suit expressed concern over the difficulty the organization had when the court required factual proof and evidence that there was not a wrongful

termination. The company had to demonstrate the toxic leader was terminated for just cause (Participants 1, 2, 4, 7).

The definition of a toxic leader used in this dissertation is support by the comments of the participants. Schmidt (2008) labeled toxic leadership as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (Schmidt, 2008, page 57, as quoted by Maxwell, 2014, p. 1). This definition is sufficient to use as an identification tool for the toxic leader. Actions of bullying are included within the behavior of abuse. Those interviewed demonstrated that new leadership is frequently required in order to remove chaos, and return the company to peaceful times. A motivational senior management that will hold all team members accountable for their actions, and will perform the function of guidance and decision making in a timely manner is an important factor in removal of toxicity, as well as restoration of order to the organization (Allio, 2012).

### **Organizational Implications**

Research into toxic leadership from the corporate position is scarce and this study begins to fill the gap by describing the human resource manager’s perspective of their experience with this leadership. “There is scanty scholarship available on the concept of toxic leadership or destructive leadership” (Mehta & Mahwshwari, 2013, p. 3). Findings support the idea that human resource personnel are equally affected both emotionally and in work stress by the toxic leader. The amount of time spent managing the toxic leader takes away from the human resource manager’s regular job tasks, creating additional workload and emotional turmoil. Furthermore, this study presents the viewpoint of the

human resource manager and examined their perspectives and perceptions. Their perspective, as discovered, is to demonstrate firm boundaries of accountability when managing the conflicts of toxic leaders. The human resource manager must be concerned with the company health when affected by a toxic person. The human resource manager will be able to identify a toxic leader because employees start to complain, or will leave the company in significant percentages. Participant 5 shared what was considered a “mass exodus of senior management within the last year” (para.1) as a significant representation. The toxic leader in this example was a board member in a government agency.

Human resource personnel must then notify senior management an issue of toxicity has arisen, and gather their approval to begin an investigation. Within the investigation there are specific steps taken by the human resource manager in order to manage the situation of toxicity and to verify procedures of documentation are being followed appropriately. Human resource personnel must document the conversations with the subordinates and every attempt to work with the toxic leader in resolving conflict. If process is not followed, a toxic leader may try to file a claim for unfair treatment. Although this seems absurd to the average individual, this was confirmed by all participants. According to participants, unfair treatment suits were filed by toxic leaders within the organization of those human resource persons who were interviewed. Participant 2 described one toxic leader who anticipated she was going to be fired, so filed suit against the company before the termination was complete. This toxic leader demanded one and one-half years of her salary as a settlement to her claim. Participant 8

shared an experience where the toxic leader had been reprimanded by senior management for segregating the female employees and expecting unequal production from them. During the reprimand the toxic leader threatened senior management and followed this with a suit. There was a two year court battle that followed this suit resulting in the toxic leader receiving one full year of pay, with a written agreement that the company would not make any derogatory or negative comments if a job referral call was received.

Senior management then must support human resource managers in the process of a write-up. If senior management decides there is a potential for a suit, than a consultant or legal assistance is considered as an option for resolution. It is important to note that human resource manager must have the support of senior management in order for the conflict to be resolved. Once the decision has been made to hire a consultant to retrain the toxic leader, a process of accountability may begin. Either a work progress report is agreed to or the consultant teaches the toxic leader a much needed tool for soft skills. Although senior management recognizes the toxic leader has knowledge, a level of accountability is imperative in order to calm the behavior and settle the disorder. Followers will rebel in private fashion by departing or filing a worker's compensation claim for stress if the situation is not controlled. Participants 1, 8, and 9 described specific events of worker's compensation suites filed for stress when the subordinate believed they had been bullied, belittled, spoken to in an abusive manner, or asked to perform tasks that fell outside of the job responsibilities and would cause them harm. It is the responsibility of senior management to listen to the human resource personnel, their recommendations for managing toxicity, and learn to support them. This in turn will

confirm for all employees they are supported by the organization they are employed with by demonstrating through the action human resource may take that toxic treatment is not tolerated.

Discussions and examples in Chapter 4 defined how the human resource participants experienced turmoil, doubt, confusion, fear, anxiety, and an extreme amount of stress while handling the process of managing the toxic leader. The participants described how they identified the toxic leader, what they did to inform senior management, what steps were taken to document the conflict, how they experienced emotional and physical strain, along with an added workload since this method is time consuming. The emotional upheaval caused to the organization, the department, senior management and human resource managers when the toxic leader produces the negative behaviors they are known for can stay with the human resource manager for several years following the event.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study helps understand the human resource manager's perspective of managing the toxic leader. Through a sample of nine participants discovery was made that describes a process used as a tool for human resource managers and senior management to process the conflict created by toxic leaders within organizations. The study should be expanded on further to discover other human resource personnel who may be able to offer more advice for holding the toxic leader accountable for actions earlier and to dispense with the necessary investigation and treatment of the situation in a more timely manner. Further studies should continue in order to understand

the senior management's responsibilities for identifying and handling toxic behaviors, and offering tools for changing this behavior within organizations. This research builds on the prior studies of Kellerman (2008), Lipman-Blumen (2004, 2005), Pellitier (2010), Tepper (2007), and Schmidt (2008, 2014) who all describe the toxic leader, identifiable behaviors, and the subordinate's reactions to the conflict that is produced from this leadership style. The gap in literature is narrowed through the responses provided by the participants. This study builds on current knowledge about the subordinate's experience by adding the human resource experience. The research describes the emotional internal conflict that occurs within the human resource manager as he or she described the dilemma between loyalty to the company, but empathy for the subordinate during the reign of the toxic leader. Toxic behavior, along with leaders who abuse their power should not be tolerated. A process of accountability for the toxic leader, as well as human resource manager and senior management, must be discovered, established and practiced in order for positive social change to result when managing the toxic leader.

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## Appendix A: Request for Interview

### **Response and agreement to interview Human Resource personnel through the PIHRA Organization – copy of e-mail sent to PIHRA and received from PIHRA.**

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**Date :** Thu, Oct 10, 2013 03:14 PM CDT

**From :** Charles Sours <XXXX>

**To :** Sabrina Maxwell <XXXX>

**Subject :** Request for Assistance

Hi Sabrina,

I apologize for the delay. Per request, here is the contact information for Rafael Rivera.

Rafael Rivera, CMP, MBA, CAE  
Executive Director  
Professionals In Human Resources Association (PIHRA)  
XXXX  
Human Resource.XXX

Charles Sours | Talent Advisor  
Association Career Network  
XXXX  
XXXX

**From:** Sabrina Maxwell [XXXX]  
**Sent:** Monday, October 07, 2013 11:12 AM  
**To:** Charles Sours; XXXX  
**Subject:** Re: PIHUMAN RESOURCEA Career Center

Hello Charles,

Thank you so much for speaking with me a moment ago. As stated in our conversation below is a copy of the correspondence with Alex Newman regarding the interviews with human resource managers.

Please send this forward to the correct person and let me know the contact I should use to get permission for this study to take place.

Call me anytime at XXXXXXXXX.

Regards,

Sabrina Maxwell

PhD in Management (candidate)

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Original E-mail

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Hi Sabrina,

Click [HERE](#) to register.

Please don't hesitate to contact me directly with any questions. I look forward to working with you.

**Alex Newman**

**Career Center Manager - PIHUMAN RESOURCEA**

[Human Resource.org](#)

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**From:** saby@charter.net [mailto:XXXX]

**Sent:** Sunday, March 25, 2012 2:48 PM

**To:** Human Resource.XXXX; Human Resource.XXX; Human Resource.XXX

**Subject:** Dissertation Topic and Request for Assistance

Dear Mr. Allain, Mr. Rivera, and Mr. Newman,

My name is Sabrina Maxwell. I am currently a student at Walden University and am in the midst of preparing my dissertation for a PhD in Management.

This note comes as a request for assistance. My dissertation topic is related to the effects of Toxic Leadership and the Human Resources Perspective. I have recently completed the Chapter 2, Literature Review, of toxicity in the workplace and am preparing to start Chapter 3. This is where I am requesting your assistance.

I would like to find 15-20 human resource managers who may be willing to form a focus group for qualitative discussion on toxic leadership. The individuals would be undisclosed, all would sign a confidentiality agreement, and they would be identified as Jane Doe or John Doe 1, 2, 3, etc. The round-table discussion could be individual if they prefer.

My intent is to discover more about the phenomenon of how human resource personnel deal with the aftermath of a toxic leader. This is a phenomenological dissertation regarding what the human resource manager thinks, believes, and feels about how to deal with the toxic leader.

I am aware that most human resource managers know about the toxic behavior, may even warn senior management about the behavior, but are required to continue with the hiring process as they are directed. Often times the leader shows their toxic behavior after approximately 6 months of employment. Human resources then is left to work through the conflict, working with the followers, retraining new hires, or handling discussions with senior management.

I have attached my original prospectus for your review. Upon further research I have adjusted my prospectus slightly, since measurements for toxicity are already available. Please feel free to review the prospectus and call me if you think the association may be able to assist. Or, if you can think of another avenue for obtaining these 20 volunteers, please let me know.

My cell is XXXXXXXXXXXX. I truly am anxious to speak with someone and would greatly appreciate any assistance you can offer. Thank you in advance for your help.

Regards,

Sabrina Maxwell

PhD Student, Walden University

## Appendix A-1: PIHRA Letter of Cooperation

### **Letter of Cooperation from PIHRA as the Community Research Partner**

Professionals in Human Resource Association

John White (XXXX): XXXX

February 10, 2014

Dear Sabrina Maxwell,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled “A Phenomenological Study of Human Resource Personnel and Their Experience with Toxic Leadership” within the Professionals in Human Resource Association (PIHRA). As part of this study, I authorize you to recruit volunteers to be interviewed regarding their experiences with toxic leaders. I also authorize you to return to our site upon completion of the study to do a power point presentation on the results, once the dissertation is complete. Individuals’ participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization’s responsibilities include: 1) assisting you in your request of volunteers for this study by working with our Career Services and Monthly Membership Meeting in order for you to complete a collection of volunteers, 2) allowing you to schedule independent and individual interviews with each volunteer based on scheduled meeting within 2 weeks after the initial request, 3) allowing you to return to present your findings at a group Monthly Membership meeting. A room will be made available for the interviews based on timing and volunteer schedules at the Orange County extension branch of the PIHRA Los Angeles Chapter. We are not offering a facilitation role in the actual interviews. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Authorization Official  
Contact Information: \_\_\_\_\_

Walden University policy on electronic signatures: An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff will verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

IRB Approval Study #02-26-14-0113049: Approved February 14, 2014

## Appendix B: Posting for Volunteers

### **Doctoral Student Looking for Assistance and Volunteers for Research on Toxic Leadership.**

This research will complete an investigation of toxic leadership within organizations. There is a premise that the toxic leader affects subordinates, decisions made by senior management, and the company as a whole. The conflict arising from the chaos this creates has to be handled through the human resource department. I am investigating this phenomenon as a human experience that affects any race, culture, industry, or organization. I am looking for 20 human resource personnel to volunteer for individual interviews to identify the issues that arise, and their personal experience when a company experiences toxic leadership. The questions are aimed at understanding the perspective of human resource professionals, how conflicts are handled, why senior management hires a toxic leader, and concerns arising from working with a toxic leader. The intention is to help human resource professionals have a voice in describing what is needed to manage conflict between a toxic leader and others in the workplace.

If you are interested in volunteering for this research please contact Sabrina Maxwell at XXXX. Your name will not be used. A consent form will be provided to all participants and your comments will remain confidential. The intention is to complete the interviews during the spring of 2014 and have a completed dissertation by the summer of 2014. I will present my findings at a monthly meeting at a PIHRA event so you can share in this exciting discovery. Thank you in advance for your interest in becoming a voice for Human Resources.

All participants must be fluent in English.

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

### Toxicity in Leadership: Interview Questions for Human Resource Managers:

Each participant will be asked to provide the below seven items on a volunteer basis. This information will form the boundaries for solid data collection.

#### Statistics:

- |                               |                           |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1) Age                        | 2) Ethnicity              |
| 3) Nationality                | 4) Male or Female         |
| 5) Years in the job           | 6) Educational attainment |
| 7) Company product or service |                           |
- 

The definition I am using in the dissertation was designed by Schmidt (2008) who labeled toxic leadership as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (p. 57).

- 1) Tell me how you and your organization will identify a toxic leader. (RQ1)
- 2) What kinds of experiences have you had with ‘toxic leaders’? Tell me at least one story, without using names, about a situation you experienced in this realm. (RQ1)
- 3) What will usually lead to the identification of toxic leader or the natural development of toxicity in the workplace? (RQ1)
- 4) What consequences have arisen within the organization when a leader is identified as toxic? Describe what type of negative consequences, if any, arose during this time.(RQ3)
- 5) How are these consequences managed when they negatively affect the team? (RQ3)
- 6) What process and methods are in place to manage the toxic leader? (RQ2)
- 7) What process may be in place for handling or resolving the negative consequences the toxic leader may have on an organization? (RQ2)
- 8) Describe, if any, what your human resource team does to train managers to recognize a toxic leader. (RQ4)

## Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study of the human resource staff's perspective on working with toxic leaders. You must have had prior experience in dealing with a toxic leader in order to take place in this study. The researcher is inviting 20 human resource personnel who have had prior experience with a toxic leader to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Sabrina Maxwell, who is a doctoral student Walden University. The participants are not being recruited within the researcher's workplace.

### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspective, challenges, and procedures used by the human resource departments to resolve conflict created within the workplace by a toxic leader.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Agree to participate in a 40 minute one-on-one interview, as this is a one-time collection of data.
- Agree to be recorded during the 40 minute period.

Here are some sample questions:

- 9) What have your experiences been with 'toxic leaders'?
- 10) How are toxic leaders identified within your organization?
- 11) What process may be in place for resolving the effects the toxic leader may have on an organization?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at the organization of Professional Institute of Human Resources (PIHRA) will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The benefit to this study is the sharing of process and procedures that may resolve conflict for others who may not know how to deal with the toxic leader.

**Payment:**

This is a voluntary interview, and no payment for services will be rendered. At the most, coffee, soda, water, and a snack will be offered.

**Privacy:**

The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by not using actual names, company names, or collecting such information. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via XXXX. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Nirenberg. He is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Walden University's approval number for this study is IRB #02-26-14-0113049 and it expires on February 14, 2015.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

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Date of consent

---

Participant's Signature

---

Researcher's Signature

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## Appendix E: First Cycle Code Data

Code	Expansion or Explanation of Code
Acquire toxic leader with a merger  Relates to RQ1	Toxic leaders often are not hired, but acquired when there is a company merger.
Collective effort to address  Relates to RQ2	Human resource managers cannot handle them alone. The senior team, president, vice president, CEO, CFO, or board must assist and be involved in managing the conflict. All must be on board and understand the situation. Otherwise there may be a power struggle or finger pointing if things go wrong. If a legal suit happens the facts must be consistent with no implication of doubt in the need to release the toxic leader.
Companies do not try to identify toxic leaders  Relates to RQ1	During the hiring process human resource completes a pre-hire interview. The toxic patterns do not show up during the interviews. The patterns show up after they are hired. Human resource law only allows a reference check to confirm they worked for the company, and for how long they worked. Sometimes human resource managers can recognize a toxic leader, but typically they do not unveil these behaviors until after they are hired. They are not directed to intentionally hire the toxic leader.
Toxicity emerges within a company  Relates to RQ1	The behaviors of the toxic leader may takes five months or more to show their ‘true colors’. The negative effects will evolve after a period of time.
Company change – new leader negative  Relates to RQ2	Sometimes new leadership displays toxicity during a period when a company is trying to recoup from poor economy, a merger, or a take-over.
Cost over \$50k to address	This is the lowest amount of money spent according to the interviews. None of the

Relates to RQ3	participants mentioned a dollar amount less than \$50k. These fees include the cost of court, attorney, mediator (if used), and buyout funds or damages paid to the toxic leader.
Discuss behavior with toxic leader  Relates to RQ2	The first step for human resource personnel is to discuss problems of the toxic leader with senior management. Once the human resource manager and senior management are in agreement a conversation takes place with the toxic leader, senior management, and the human resource manager. A behavior contract can be put into place to give the toxic leader a chance for change. This does not work very often though because the toxic leader truly does not understand how their behavior is wrong.
Discuss with senior management – no use  Relates to RQ2	When the human resource manager tells senior management there is a problem they either do not want to deal with it, they are too busy to handle it, or would rather ignore the behavior rather than deal with the conflict. This allows toxicity to grow.
Discuss with senior management – does help  Relates to RQ3	Human resource personnel will go to senior management and clarify the problem. If senior management is supportive, he/she will be proactive, and understands there are necessary steps to hold toxic leader accountable for their actions. Senior management will support the human resource manager through the process of reprimand or managing the toxic leader.
Domino or trickle down negative affect  Relates to RQ2	The negative effects of a toxic leader funnel downward, starting with employee morale; employee performance and attendance. This will eventually affect the bottom line net income. The time frame

	varies dependent upon the severity of the toxic leader influence.
Toxic leader identified by employee complaints  Relates to RQ1	The first step of a process will be employees coming to human resource and complaining about the toxic leader. Employees must have a trust in the human resource manager in order to do so.
Employees exit  Relates to RQ1	The human resource participants stated if the employee has good talent, does not have commitment toward the company, or believes nothing will change, the employee would rather leave and find a new job rather than work through the issues of the toxic leader.
Human Resource is the cheerleader keeping moral up  Relates to RQ2	Human resource personnel must maintain the communication between the employee, senior management, and the toxic leader. Their main purpose when toxicity gets extreme is to keep employees motivated, assure them change is coming, tactfully communicate to subordinates to hold on and not quit; all without breach of confidentiality or false promises, and trust.
Handle the toxic leader as soon as possible  Relates to RQ3	Senior management must act quickly to remedy the issues of the toxic leader. If they do not then the domino effect will happen very quickly; less than five months.
Legal assistance is used  Relates to RQ3	If senior management is supportive to the human resource department, senior management will give approval to contact a lawyer to affirm their legal boundaries. The lawyer will work with the human resource department by assisting them in actions all must take to protect the company. The lawyer will only step in if the process is not going well and it is clear a law suit is pending. The legal concern can be either the toxic leader suing the

	company or the company wanting to severance out the toxic leader.
New leaders – positive results  Relates to RQ3	If the company handles the toxic leader quickly and correctly they will hire new leaders above the toxic leader. The new leaders are better with soft skills and are supportive accountability or in removing the toxic leader. Human resource will then receive the necessary approval to remove the toxic leader.
Percent of reporting is low  Relates to RQ1	Subordinates hardly ever report the toxic leader. They will just continue to work under their reign. (Note: this remark was made by only 2 of the 9 participants.)
Senior management is the toxic leader  Relates to RQ1	Senior management as the toxic leader is the owner of the company, the president, vice president, CEO, or CFO, and human resource managers cannot go to them with concerns because they are toxic. It would create a situation where human resource personnel could be terminated, according to all Participants except 7 and 8.
Severance out the toxic leader  Relates to RQ3	When senior management agrees with human resource personnel that the toxic leader has to be removed legal aid is brought in to negotiate a dollar value of severance pay. It typically comes down to a financial negotiation between parties. Even though the grounds for employment may be “At Will” there is a significant negative financial affect if they do not negotiate with the toxic leader. The toxic leader typically will file a ‘wrongful termination’ case and sue the company if this is not handled properly. The cost of the suit far exceeds a buy-out of the toxic leader. Anywhere from 6 months to 2 years of salary was reported as a standard buy-out or severance pay.

Less than 5 months to resolve  Relates to RQ3	The lowest amount of time reported by one of the participants was 5 months for resolving conflict with the toxic leader.
More than 5 months to resolve  Relates to RQ3	This is a measurement to see how many participants reported more time than the lowest time reported for resolving conflict with the toxic leader.
Affects stay with you for a long time  Relates to RQ3	Participants reported that the negative effects can be harmful to subordinates and to the company. This measurement is used to determine if this remained as a constant for all of the 9 participants.
The toxic leader has his/her own agenda  Relates to RQ1	The toxic leader shows behavior to the human resource that they want to be in control and will act as if they have control no matter who they harm or what harm they do.
The toxic leader cannot self-identify  Relates to RQ2	When the toxic leader is asked by human resource if they recognize their behavior is harmful the toxic leader does not understand or relate to the comment. They do not believe or acknowledge their behavior is negative.
The toxic leader destroys process  Relates to RQ1	The toxic leader's own agenda will upset regular process, negatively affect team communication, and may chase away business. The toxic leader does not identify this as their action or responsibility.
The toxic leader has bad/too much authority – can do what they want  Relates to RQ1	The authoritarian personality in the toxic leader causes them to take steps of power that the company may not have authorized or approved of. The toxic leader will over step their boundaries in order to get their way and believe it is within their authority to do so.

The toxic leader has no people skills  Relates to RQ1	The toxic leader is lacking in the soft skills of communication, compassion, and caring that will motivate people to follow a leader.
The toxic leader is intelligent and has good knowledge  Relates to RQ2	The toxic leader is typically very intelligent, has excellent knowledge specific to the organization's field or product, and the company values their knowledge. This is why senior management wants to keep the toxic leader and wants to help them change the behavior. Companies will work with the toxic leader for their knowledge.
The toxic leader not held accountable  Relates to rQ2	Because the toxic leader has such knowledge corporate senior management will sometimes overlook the behavior in hopes of a change, or they will allow the toxic leader to follow their own agenda until the negative situation is severe enough that something has to change. The toxic leader may be the owner, a family member of the owner, and has more freedom.
The toxic leader steps on toes  Relates to RQ1	Due to the toxic leader having solid industry knowledge, he/she will push the limits on process, organizational structure, not communicate upward or with team members, and has an arrogant nature that shows in how they work with others.
The toxic leader activity will repeat  Relates to RQ3	The toxic leader will continue the destructive behavior within the company if not controlled.
Take interviews  Relates to RQ1	A third step to the process is to interview subordinates who are negatively affected by the toxic leader behavior. Senior management will give approval to the human resource, to a third-party coach, or to legal counsel to interview subordinates in order to gain an understanding of the

	depth toxicity has reached within the organization.
Third-party costs will increase Relates to RQ3	Coaches, mediators, EEOC, or counselors may be brought in to assist the employee, or work with the toxic leader to curtail negative behavior and train them in people skills.
Toxic character fits within dissertation	The number of times a participant made a statement to describe the toxic leader that fit into the definition by Schmidt.

## Appendix F: First Cycle Code

<u>Codes for Toxic Leadership</u>	<i>Part. No. 1</i>	<i>Part. No. 2</i>	<i>Part. No. 3</i>	<i>Part. No. 4</i>	<i>Part. No. 5</i>	<i>Part. No. 6</i>	<i>Part. No. 7</i>	<i>Part. No. 8</i>	<i>Part. No. 9</i>
Acquire toxic leader with a merge	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Collective effort to address	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1
Companies do not try to identify toxic leader	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Toxicity emerges within the company	2	0	1	1	1	1	2	1	1
Company Change - new leaders negative	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Cost over \$60k to address	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	2	3
Discuss behavior with toxic leader	1	1	3	3	0	0	1	1	1
Discuss with senior management - no use	0	1	0	1	5	2	0	1	1
Discuss with senior management - does help	1	5	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
Domino or trickle down negative affect	0	3	1	1	1	1	2	0	0
Toxic leader identified by employee complaints	6	2	1	2	2	1	2	4	3
Employee files workers compensation	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Employees exit	3	3	2	3	8	2	3	5	2
Human resource is the cheerleader keeping moral	1	5	1	5	3	4	3	2	2
Handle the toxic leader as soon as possible	0	0	3	1	0	0	1	0	0
Legal assistance is used	4	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
New leaders - positive results	1	4	0	1	1	0	1	2	2
Percent of reporting is low	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Senior management is the toxic leader	1	1	2	1	2	2	0	0	0
Severance out the toxic leader	1	4	1	0	2	0	0	2	1
Less than 5 months to resolve	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
More than 5 months to resolve	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Affects stay with you long term	3	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
Toxic leader has own agenda	4	6	1	1	3	4	2	3	2
Toxic leader can't self-identify	1	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0
Toxic leader destroys process	0	7	4	0	3	1	1	2	2
Toxic leader has bad authority - can do what they want	0	4	0	0	0	2	0	1	1
Toxic leader has no people skills	1	2	1	1	0	2	2	2	1
Toxic leader is intelligent and has good knowledge	0	0	3	1	0	1	0	1	1
Toxic leader not held accountable	0	5	0	1	0	1	1	2	0
Toxic leader steps on toes	0	3	4	0	2	2	2	1	1
Toxic leader activity will repeat	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Take employee interviews	3	4	0	4	0	1	2	0	1
Third-party costs increase	4	1	0	3	0	0	1	0	0

Toxic characters fit within dissertation	8	5	3	2	4	3	2	5	2
Total Counts of Code Use	59	73	32	38	42	35	34	45	36

Notes on Quantities:

- a) Number of times each participant made a statement that matched the codes.
- b) Process of managing or handling the toxic leader.
- c) Why toxic leadership remain in organizations.
- d) How human resource personnel deal with the ensuing issues of the toxic leader.
- e) TL means toxic leadership
- f) SR is Senior Management
- g) HR is Human Resource Personnel
- g) Tallied through personal interviews.
- h) Toxic Leader: narcissistic, authoritarian, abusive, self-promoting, unpredictable

### Appendix G: Participant Demographic

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Years in Job</i>
56	Male	Caucasian	MA	Banking	22
36	Female	Caucasian	BA	Office Supplies	14
48	Female	Caucasian	MA	Office Supplies	20
36	Male	Hispanic	BA	Production	12
34	Female	Black	MA	Government	12
43	Male	Asian	BA	Production	8
31	Female	Caucasian	MA	Education	8
70	Female	Caucasian	BA	Production	32
43	Female	Caucasian	MA	Banking	17
29	Female	Caucasian	BA	Real Estate	17
42	Female	Hispanic	BA	Real Estate	14
51	Female	Asian	BA	Government	7
43	Male	Caucasian	BA	Education	10
55	Female	Black	MA	Law	16