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Strategies to Identify and Manage Toxic Leaders for Mitigating Organizational Toxicity

Ellen Scott
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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Ellen Scott

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Walden University

2025

Abstract

Strategies to Identify and Manage Toxic Leaders for Mitigating Organizational Toxicity

by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2019

MBA, University of Maryland, 2010

MS, University of Maryland, 2009

BS, College of Notre Dame of Maryland, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

May 2025

Abstract

The prevalence of toxic leadership across various sectors like healthcare, the military, corporations, and educational institutions presents a significant challenge, undermining organizational culture and employee well-being, leading to increased turnover and reduced performance. Guided by the toxic triangle as the conceptual framework, this qualitative Delphi study's purpose involved leadership experts from across the United States to reach a consensus on organizational strategies for identifying, managing, and mitigating organizational toxicity. The research questions were focused on determining the most suitable strategies for recognizing toxicity in the organization and addressing it effectively. A panel of 30 leadership experts from across the United States, recruited through Prolific, were selected based on their educational and professional experience and completed four iterative rounds of questionnaires. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. Findings indicated a multifaceted approach to combat toxic leadership, highlighting the importance of implementing organizational strategies that prioritize identifying and removing toxic leaders, investing in continuous leadership development, and building cultures that value open communication and ethical leadership practices. A key recommendation is for organizational leaders to realize the importance of applying this study's actionable strategies that might continually improve employee welfare and workplace performance. The implications for positive social change include the potential for organizational leaders to address toxic leadership behaviors, mitigate organizational toxicity, and foster healthy cultures that enhance employee well-being and societal norms for sustainable success in an ever-evolving business landscape.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Aunt Roxanne, whose spirit continues to be a beacon of inspiration in my life. Her unwavering enthusiasm for my research and academic pursuits, even into her 96th year, was a testament to her indomitable spirit and the deep love she held for me. Roxanne, who lovingly raised me from childhood, was not only a guardian but my world. Her legacy endures through her beloved grandson and the profound impact she made on those fortunate enough to have known her.

I extend my heartfelt dedication to my son, Xavier, whose arrival into my life has been a source of immeasurable joy and motivation. As you embark on your academic journey, Xavier, know that the strength, support, and perseverance you have instilled in me will be yours in abundance. Your presence has taught me that the possibilities are limitless when pursued with heart and determination.

To my husband, your unwavering partnership and support have been my anchor throughout this endeavor. Your understanding and encouragement during countless late-night writing sessions have provided comfort and strength. Your role in this journey has been pivotal; I am eternally grateful.

Together, you have all shaped the contours of my heart and the trajectory of my academic voyage. This work is a tribute to the love, support, and inspiration you have generously bestowed upon me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Toxic leadership unleashes detrimental effects across an organization, impacting performance, culture, and employee well-being. Recent literature includes significant data detailing toxic leaders' effects on organizational performance, culture, and employees. Toxic leadership is characterized as a set of self-centered attitudes, motives, and behaviors that bring systemic harm to an organization and its employees, either immediately or gradually (Snow et al., 2021). Toxic leaders introduce myriad problems for any organization, negatively affecting the employees and the work environment. Toxic leaders can potentially destroy their organizations, workers, and society (Erdal & Budak, 2021). The impacts are not confined to interpersonal relationships; they extend to organizational performance metrics, including productivity, innovation, and overall effectiveness.

Understanding toxic leaders' specific behaviors and actions is imperative for developing effective preventive and remedial measures. Jonason et al. (2012) emphasized unifying these harmful traits and behaviors early and implementing strategies to counteract them. The increasing prevalence of toxic leaders within organizations underscores the urgent need for further study and the development of robust mitigation strategies. In a study by Williams (2018), respondents reported encountering an average of 2.9 toxic leaders throughout their 18.3 years of service. Moreover, two-thirds of American employees, as questioned by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2019) said they had worked in a toxic work environment. Understanding how to

identify and manage these leaders is necessary for the global economy. Moreover, this research has also shown that organizations lack the resources to combat the effects of toxic leadership (Wolor et al., 2022).

Effective organizational leadership that promotes a healthy and collaborative work environment is critical to the success of an organization. However, missing from the literature has been an examination of organizations' processes to identify and manage toxic leaders once uncovered. The current organizational processes that can identify and manage toxic leaders have been discussed in depth in this research. Insights from this study contribute to positive social change by reducing employee exposure to toxic leaders and toxicity in the workplace through early intervention and leadership support mechanisms. Effective identification and mitigation are essential, given the significant harm toxic leaders can inflict on employees and organizational culture. The information gained from this study provides a foundation to assist in advancing change management models and leadership training programs to integrate practices to identify organizational toxicity even when it is not reported. In addition, this research provides criteria to define the leadership qualities necessary to foster corporate cultures that are resilient enough to overcome organizational toxicity. The findings of this research can provide organizational leaders and policymakers with helpful intervention processes for organizational toxicity and toxic leaders.

Chapter 1 includes the background of the topic, the problem of this study, and the purpose of this study. The research question and conceptual framework guiding this study are outlined. The chapter includes information on the nature of the study, definitions of

important terminology used for this study, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, the study's significance, and contribution to the literature.

Background of the Study

Leadership research has been prominent in the literature; recently, the study of toxic leadership has grown in interest to researchers. Many names have been used to reference toxic leaders throughout the literature, including corporate psychopath, successful psychopath, dark leader, destructive leader, dysfunctional leader, dark triad leader, or organizational psychopath (Krasikova et al., 2013; Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2016). Mackey et al. (2020) noted that various destructive leadership styles encompass negative actions. However, toxic leadership is distinguished as leaders widely seen as harmful to those who follow them. Wicker (1996) first described toxic leaders as malicious and vengeful, emphasizing the intentionality behind their destructive behaviors. Hughes (2022) described these leaders as employing tactics including deception, intimidation, coercion, and unfair punishment of others to achieve personal gains.

Toxic leadership, characterized by malevolent and domineering personalities, detrimentally affects the mental and physical health of employees, as evidenced in the work of Erdal and Budak (2021). In their study, Gandolfi and Stone (2022) described toxic leadership as a series of intentional or unintentional actions by self-serving leaders that undermine and discourage followers from genuinely trying to achieve the organization's mission and vision. By prioritizing their own goals over the needs of their followers, toxic leaders create a demoralized workforce, leading to the organization

deteriorating from within. Snow et al. (2021) characterized toxic leadership as self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that cause systemic harm to the health of an organization and its people. Toxic leadership involves a combination of harmful behaviors that lead to the deterioration of the organizational environment and the well-being of its members. The effects of toxic leadership are not limited to immediate relationships but extend to broader organizational performance and culture.

Boddy (2015) described a spectrum of behavioral characteristics inherent in toxic leaders. These traits predispose individuals to engage in predatory and aggressive actions, primarily motivated by self-interest. Such behaviors not only undermine the well-being of employees but also compromise the ethical foundation and integrity of the organizational culture. Toxic leaders are attracted to for-profit organizations mainly because of the allure of achieving power, prestige, and money (Shank et al., 2018). Managers exhibiting behaviors characteristic of toxic leadership contribute to a range of adverse outcomes among employees, including heightened frustration, diminished attention, and reduced workplace performance, alongside precipitating stress, anxiety, and depression, as highlighted by Erdal and Budak (2021). The repercussions of toxic leadership extend beyond the immediate workplace environment, exerting a long-term detrimental effect on the well-being of the employees, the organizational climate, and the familial dynamics of those subjected to such leadership. The findings highlight the pervasive nature of toxic leadership and its capacity to infiltrate and disrupt various facets of professional and personal life.

Toxic leadership contributes to lowered feelings of organizational commitment and increased turnover intentions. Erdal and Budak (2021) found that toxic leadership behaviors can cause organizational insecurity and job dissatisfaction. Researchers have found correlations between toxic leaders and adverse work outcomes, including increased counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), workplace aggression, job dissatisfaction, negative affectivity, high employee distress, high rates of turnover, and increased levels of absenteeism (Baysinger et al., 2014; Boddy, 2015; Boddy & Taplin, 2016; Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). Toxic leaders can also have significant financial impacts on the organization. The escalating costs of toxic leadership in the United States, which now total more than \$23,000,000,000 annually, have motivated organizational and leadership researchers to investigate the link between destructive leadership practices and financial inefficiencies (Ofei et al., 2023).

Toxic leaders affect organizational culture through abusive supervision and bullying, leading to decreased job satisfaction, lowered feelings of organizational commitment to the organization, and increased turnover intentions by employees (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016). There are correlations between toxic leadership and adverse work outcomes, including increases in CWBs, workplace aggression (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013), job dissatisfaction, negative affectivity (Boddy & Taplin, 2016), high employee distress, high rates of turnover, and increased levels of absenteeism (Boddy, 2015). Recent studies have concluded that task participation, negative socioemotional behavior, and group effectiveness are adversely affected by negative, destructive behaviors exhibited by toxic leaders (Baysinger et al., 2014).

Problem Statement

Toxic leadership has led to significant financial losses for organizations, with over \$23,000,000,000 attributed to high employee turnover, increased absenteeism, and decreased productivity (Satiani & Satiani, 2022). Toxic leaders, characterized by their manipulative, narcissistic, and authoritarian dispositions, exploit their authority for personal gain, displaying a profound indifference to harm to employees and organizational integrity (Labrague, 2021). Toxic leadership has been shown to lead to many adverse outcomes, including decreased employee engagement, increased turnover, and a general erosion of the ethical foundation of organizations (Wolor et al., 2022). This nuanced reality underscores the need to explore how different strategies can work together to identify and manage organizational toxicity. There remains a significant gap in organizational strategies for identifying and managing toxic leaders and preventing the proliferation of toxic behaviors in leadership roles (Ahmed et al., 2025; Wolor et al., 2022).

The social problem is that toxic leaders engage in behaviors that are harmful and abusive, fostering a hostile work environment and resulting in significant negative consequences (Hughes, 2022). The ripple effects of such leadership extend beyond individual employees, contributing to a toxic organizational culture that stifles collaboration, innovation, and trust (Ahmed et al., 2024). Without intervention, toxicity creates rampant disempowerment and disengagement, undermining the workforce's collective potential while eroding the organization's core values. Organizations face challenges in identifying and managing individuals who are antisocial and engage in

manipulation to deceive and outmaneuver oversight mechanisms (Buyukyilmaz & Kara, 2024). The specific research problem is that due to toxic leaders' ability to ascend organizational ladders by manipulating employees into unethical practices, toxicity can permeate the organization's culture, leading to a host of adverse outcomes, including diminished morale, productivity, and job satisfaction. Concurrently, it is imperative to investigate the potential countermeasures to mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership and foster a positive and engaging work environment (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). By highlighting the necessity for comprehensive approaches and standardized methods, this research provides valuable insights that can help organizations implement proactive measures to prevent the onset of toxic leadership behaviors. These strategies contribute to positive social change by preventing the onset of toxicity in leadership roles, fostering healthier organizational cultures, and enhancing overall employee well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on effectively identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity. The Delphi method design was modified for use on an online platform, referred to as the e-Delphi study or modified Delphi design, to address this gap in the literature (see Cole et al., 2013). This research sought to close a gap in the literature on the need for remediation strategies because organizations are still uncovering the implications that come with the presence of toxic leaders (Boddy, 2015). A Delphi design denotes that the first round seeks consensus on already occurring

data, specifically in this study, and current strategies organizations use to identify and manage toxic leaders (see Avella, 2016).

The study adopted the generic Delphi toolkit from Day and Bobeva (2005) to collect data. To facilitate this research, I conducted rounds of questionnaires that included open-ended and Likert-scale questions. These questions focused on remediation strategies organizations can use to manage toxic leaders and reverse the effects of organizational toxicity. Numerous researchers have highlighted the need for a better understanding of how toxic leaders can enter organizations and climb the corporate hierarchy, illustrating the need for leadership to have the tools to manage and identify toxic leaders (Boddy & Croft, 2016). This research sought to provide leadership with new information regarding what strategies effectively mitigate harmful effects from toxic leaders and screening them before the destruction. This study's panel included a group of practitioners and those with research backgrounds in leadership. More specifically, the practitioners included human resources managers, project managers, executive leaders, workplace arbitrators, and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigators within the United States with experience managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity; those engaged in scholarly activities included educators, researchers, those who have published interdisciplinary studies in toxic, leadership/organizational toxicity, or presented on the topic.

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions to examine the prevalence and effectiveness of organizational practices resolving leadership from toxic leaders. Data

collection, inquiry, and analysis were approached around the individual perspectives of three research questions, from now on referred to as RQ1 through RQ3:

RQ1: What are effective strategies for managing toxic leaders?

RQ2: What are effective strategies to identify toxic leaders?

RQ3: What are effective strategies to mitigate organizational toxicity?

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework focuses on the effective identification and management strategies organizations need to recognize and manage toxic leaders while mitigating organizational toxicity. The constructivist approach was used to explore dimensions of toxic leadership, including how toxic leaders operate, how they impact the organization, and how they impact its employees. The concept grounding this study is the toxic triangle introduced by Padilla et al. (2007). The toxic triangle is a framework that illustrates how toxic leadership, susceptible followers, and conducive environments interact to produce destructive outcomes within organizations. The model highlights that toxic leadership is not an isolated phenomenon but results from the interaction between leaders' and followers' behaviors and the organizational environment.

Toxic leaders sometimes go undetected because they are charismatic and manipulative while persuading senior leadership that they are successful, exemplary leaders. Boddy (2015) discussed cases where employees who reported their abusive supervisor to management were sometimes treated with incredulity and denial.

Researchers have found that leadership is vital to the success of an organization, its employees, and its organizational culture. In cases where a toxic leader is present, there

are significant impacts on all three areas (Boddy, 2017). Relationships between leadership and subordinates affect employee experiences on the job, which can be used to realize the existence of a toxic leader within the organization (Shkoler et al., 2019). Boddy and Taplin's (2017) findings suggest it is possible to identify toxic leaders through their destructive behaviors before wreaking havoc on teams, but empirical data are needed. Additionally, toxic leaders often shield their competence and exert control over followers through manipulative and domineering tactics, illustrating the need for further investigation (Milosevic et al., 2020).

Looking into toxic leadership using the three facets of the toxic triangle allows for an in-depth exploration of the factors allowing toxicity to run rampant, along with strategies to aid organizations in crisis effectively. Destructive leaders exploit susceptible followers and thrive in conducive environments, deteriorating organizational culture and morale. Due to the cyclical relationship of the toxic triangle in which each component reinforces the other, effectively addressing all three components is imperative to mitigate the impact of toxic leadership. The expert panel gathered data on strategies to address toxicity effectively, relying on their expertise to inform these factors. A more detailed analysis of the toxic triangle framework is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I conducted this study using a qualitative Delphi technique to build consensus among leadership experts on effectively identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity. The Delphi technique was chosen because it provides a method for obtaining consensus from experts on phenomena with little or no conclusive

evidence and where expert opinion is essential (Meshkat et al., 2014). The e-Delphi method, initially coined by MacEachren, innovatively uses the classical Delphi technique electronically to organize experts over the internet, enhancing the method's reach and efficiency (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The key concept investigated in this study was the identification and management of toxic leadership and the mitigation of toxic leaders' effects on organizational toxicity. The qualitative approach was selected to generate rich, detailed data, preserving the participants' perspectives and providing multiple contexts for understanding the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and realistic data collection through interviews, surveys, and open-ended questionnaires (Gaus, 2017).

Participants were recruited via crowdsourcing, using the pool available through Prolific. The selection criteria focused on individuals with a unique understanding of toxic leadership and experience in recognizing and mitigating organizational toxicity. In the first round of the Delphi process, open-ended questions were used to generate a list of ideas for alleviating organizational toxicity. Subsequent rounds (II, III, and IV) employed Likert-scale questions to gain consensus on the strategies presented. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach to find common themes. Using this structured approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of expert opinions and the identification of effective strategies for managing toxic leadership and mitigating adverse effects.

Definitions

Abusive supervision: A leader lacking self-control and possessing grandiose aspirations; followers and employees enable them with disregard for the abusive behaviors and are unwilling to intervene effectively (Fosse et al., 2019)

Conducive environments: Certain organizational environments enable toxic leadership to flourish. These environments are often characterized by instability, perceived threats, cultural values that support power concentration, and a lack of checks and balances (Padilla et al., 2007).

Leadership: Individuals who align employees to the collective organizational vision through motivation and inspiration (Kotter, 2017).

Susceptible followers: Followers who are vulnerable to toxic leadership can be categorized into two groups: conformers and colluders. Conformers comply due to fear, dependence, or low self-esteem, whereas colluders actively support the toxic leader to achieve personal gains (Padilla et al., 2007).

Toxic leadership: Leaders employ a series of deliberate behaviors that are unpredictable, dysfunctional, abusive, and self-serving and exhibit personality traits of intimidation, bullying, manipulation, or aggression to bully employees into following their demands (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014).

Workplace bullying: Prolonged exposure to continuous negative behaviors in the workplace; the targeted individual feels unable to defend themselves against the behaviors due to an imbalance in power (Derue et al., 2011).

Assumptions

The assumptions during this study included that all subject matter experts who volunteered for this study had experience with a toxic leader or mitigating organizational toxicity. Additionally, I assumed that the experts selected for the study would view the research problem as significant and agree to serve as participants on the e-Delphi panel. This study also assumed that those who volunteered for the study would have experience managing a toxic leader and could articulate that experience. I assumed all participants for this study would provide honest and forthcoming answers to questions because they acknowledge the importance of this study. By gathering more information regarding toxic leadership and measures employed to minimize its effects, organizations will be better informed about mitigating toxic attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, providing insights informing strategies that organizations use to manage toxic leaders.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to an expert panel of 30 educators, human resources managers, managers, and executive leaders of public corporations in the United States who have had at least one experience implementing remediation strategies or managing a toxic leader. The definition of toxic leadership used in this research encompasses the description by Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) in that toxic leadership describes leaders employing a series of deliberate behaviors that are unpredictable, dysfunctional, abusive, and self-serving and exhibit personality traits of intimidation, bullying, manipulation, or aggression to bully employees into following their demands and using the following definition by Schmidt (2008) who labeled toxic leaders as

“narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (p. 57).

The scope of the research included gathering data by convening an e-Delphi panel via crowdsourcing recruitment. The inclusion criteria included: (a) human resources managers, project managers, EEOC mediators, executive leaders, or participants occupying top leadership positions in public corporations within the United States; (b) at least 5 years of experience; (c) experience identifying or managing a toxic leader and mitigating effects of toxic leadership; (d) published interdisciplinary studies in toxic leadership/organizational toxicity or presented on the topic; (e) educators teaching on leadership for at least 5 years; and (f) an MBA or PhD in leadership. I aimed to understand better the methods leaders employ to overcome organizational toxicity. By managing participant selection based on the inclusion criteria, I was able to examine strategies used to resolve situations with toxicity and toxic leaders within an organization. Thematic analysis captured the essential concepts within the data set for each round of this study.

The study’s limits focused solely on those considered toxic leaders and did not include other areas of ineffective, dysfunctional, or unethical leadership. It was also imperative to maintain the anonymity of research participants and the details of their companies but to focus solely on strategies used to deal with the toxic leader; therefore, no demographic data were collected. This study was focused on resolving issues surrounding toxic leaders rather than looking for positive leadership, as this study sought

to understand strategies organizational leadership uses to effectively identify and manage a toxic leader.

Limitations

In this study, the delineation of *toxic leadership* presented a methodological challenge, primarily due to the potential introduction of bias associated with the term's connotations. Efforts to mitigate this bias included rigorous professional analysis and the practice of reflexive journaling to maintain objectivity. Another potential limitation was the inherent biases related to participants' understanding of toxic leadership, which might have influenced their responses. However, careful selection criteria for participants were designed to minimize this effect. The study's reliance on voluntary participants with specific expertise to address the research questions did arise, which resulted in a shift to using Prolific for participant recruitment. Regarding data quality, the study benefited from using Prolific, which yielded high-quality responses with minimal data exclusion ($n = 7$). Adopting an online survey facilitated diverse data collection across various organizations and professional fields, enhancing variability.

Limitations in research are often beyond the control of an investigator. In this case, the authenticity of participant responses to the online survey posed a challenge. Rigorous attention to the research design and analytical rigor were employed to counteract potential biases. Adopting strategies such as data triangulation, expert review of summaries, and comprehensive documentation helped safeguard against researcher bias. Maintaining participant anonymity was crucial in ensuring the genuineness of the responses, thereby upholding the study's validity. These measures, aligned with a

transparent acknowledgment of any pre-existing biases, were instrumental in maintaining the integrity and reliability of the research findings.

Significance of the Study

The topic of toxic leadership is significant and warrants further study due to its impact on organizations. Organizational leadership is responsible for promoting safe and conducive environments for collaboration and innovation among employees. Toxic leaders can severely inhibit the harmonious environment in the workplace because employee experiences are heavily impacted by their relationships with leadership (Shkoler et al., 2019). Uncontrolled toxic leaders can introduce conflict, CWBs, bullying, and harassment that restricts employees' ability to perform job functions. Experiencing toxic leadership in the workplace often leads to decreased job satisfaction, reduced involvement and motivation, increased thoughts of quitting, higher absenteeism, lower morale, and careless employee behavior (Wolor et al., 2022). Toxic leaders can severely impact the mental health and well-being of employees through abusive supervision, bullying, and harassment (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016).

Current studies emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies to detect toxic leadership behaviors early and implement effective management practices. Padilla et al. (2007) suggested that toxic leadership can be overcome only by examining the toxic triangle: the toxic leader, the organizational environment, and the followers of toxic leaders. Khasawneh et al. (2024) determined that curing organizational toxicity involves a thorough understanding of the level of toxicity and the associated behaviors of toxic leaders. In addition to impacting employees and performance, toxic leaders present cost

and legal implications for an organization (Li et al., 2024). Determining effective strategies to manage the harmful effects of toxic leaders could improve the lives of employees, primarily by decreasing work-related stress and increasing mental health and job performance (Hinen, 2020).

This study was conducted to advance the literature by understanding how to recognize a toxic leader and manage the negative impacts on the workforce. The results of this study provide a blueprint for preventing and mitigating organizational toxicity that leaders can include in their processes. Many researchers agree that a feasible list of strategies for management experts to employ in the early detection of toxic leadership needs to be included in the literature (Crawford & Kelder, 2019). The study is unique because I used an e-Delphi method to gain consensus on strategies leaders can use to identify toxic leaders, especially when followers fail to report them. Improving techniques that could mitigate future devastating organizational effects and managing toxic leaders is necessary. Addressing the phenomenon of toxic leaders is essential for developing robust frameworks and interventions that can prevent the onset of toxic behaviors and promote healthier, more productive work environments.

Significance to Practice

The knowledge gained by understanding toxic leadership and strategies mitigating destruction by the toxic leader could help other organizations. The findings in the study by Boddy and Taplin (2017) indicated that toxic leaders across the health and financial sectors require management and screening strategies aimed at minimizing damage and workplace bullying. Findings from this research could be significant to practice because

the study could be used to change company policy and leadership practices. Researchers agree that the organization's goals must be protected because toxic leaders can create chaos within organizations (Boddy, 2013). By identifying effective strategies for managing and screening toxic leaders, this research provides actionable insights for organizations in various sectors, including health, finance, and the military. Implementing these strategies can help organizations create healthier work environments, reduce workplace bullying, and improve organizational performance.

Significance to Theory

Exploring responsible leadership is essential to research due to the increase in psychopathic leaders and organizations having limited methods to restore balance and manage destruction (Stahl & De Luque, 2014). The findings in Boddy and Taplin's (2017) study indicated that toxic leaders across the health and financial sectors require management and screening strategies aimed at minimizing damage and workplace bullying. Furthermore, the findings were echoed by Hinen (2020), who called for organizational toxicity mitigation strategies that leaders could use in the military. The use of Padilla et al.'s (2007) toxic triangle as the conceptual framework for this study further contributes to the literature as the strategies discussed address all three components of the model. In this study, I expanded the concepts from the toxic triangle and applied these as measures to discuss toxic leadership and behaviors typically used by toxic leaders. The knowledge gained from this study could help close the gap in the literature in understanding how organizations can prevent hiring toxic leadership and mitigate the consequences of toxic leadership.

Significance to Social Change

Researchers have demonstrated that incidences of toxic leadership are prevalent in virtually every industry. Responsible and ethical leadership is necessary for organizations and society alike. Positive social change could result from providing these toxic leader remediation strategies to the research community and improve the lives of previously targeted employees by decreasing work-related stress and increasing mental health and job performance. Additionally, this study can generate awareness of strategies organizations could use to maintain nontoxic workplace environments (Anjum et al., 2018).

Insights from this study could contribute to positive social change by reducing employee exposure to toxic leaders and toxicity in the workplace through early intervention and leadership support. This study has significant implications for positive social change by promoting healthier organizational cultures and enhancing employee well-being. Organizations can foster environments where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated by preventing the hiring of toxic leaders and mitigating the impact of toxic leadership. This improves job satisfaction and mental health and contributes to the broader goal of creating ethical and sustainable organizational practices.

Summary and Transition

In this chapter, I discussed the phenomenon of toxic leaders and how they toxify the organizational culture and the employees. Additionally, the effects on the organization and the people, which can lead to disastrous results, were discussed. The

purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity effectively. Study participants were individuals who had worked solely for organizations within the United States.

Chapter 1 introduced the study, including the problem being addressed and the importance of addressing the toxic leader. Chapter 2 provides information on the chosen conceptual framework, a literature review, and the processes involved in researching this topic. The evolution of the toxic leader is discussed, along with the toxicity that can permeate the organization and methods to manage it.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on how to identify and manage toxic leaders and mitigate organizational toxicity effectively. This chapter looks back at the literature on toxic leadership, covering how toxic leadership and organizational toxicity are defined. The chapter includes reviewing critical studies about various aspects of toxic leadership and highlighting areas where more research is needed. The discussion also touches on how toxic leadership affects leaders, followers, and the whole organization. The chapter also looks at critical concepts like the toxic triangle to give an organized view of what is currently known in this field. The chapter wraps up with a summary of the research on toxic leadership, highlighting the widespread impact of toxic leaders in organizations and the importance of having a way to identify such leaders early on.

This literature review aimed to survey current works and examine various research articles presenting qualitative and quantitative outcomes that propose definitions, theories, and models linked with the study of toxic leaders. The review provides adequate evidence supporting the need for this study to explore the effects toxic leaders have on their organizations.

Literature Search Strategy

To gather relevant literature for this review, searches were conducted online via Walden University's library databases such as ABI/INFORM Complete (ProQuest), Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journal, EBSCOhost, and SAGE

Premier, and search engines including Google Scholar. To find relevant articles, key search terms and combination phrases were used, such as *corporate psychopath, counterproductive work behaviors, origins of workplace problems, historical elements of workplace incivility, abusive supervision, bullying in the workplace, tyranny, dark triad leadership, deviant leadership, organizational psychopath, leadership behavior, influence, leadership style, toxic leadership, toxic workplace/work environment, toxic/complicit followers, toxic triangle, worker well-being, and coping with a toxic work environment*. I used the most recent studies on my topic whenever possible for this literature review. Almost all the sources used for this literature review were obtained electronically.

Toxic leadership has existed in organizations and societies since the dawn of leadership, with a history full of stories of leaders who have displayed toxic behaviors to fulfill personal needs. Many corporate scandals and catastrophic failures at corporations such as Enron, WorldCom, and Lehman Brothers have been attributed to the behaviors of toxic leaders (Boddy, 2017). Leaders are vital to organizations and directly correlate to organizational effectiveness and performance, whereas toxic leaders can incapacitate an organization (Harms et al., 2011). Past research has been called to promote the good, ideal, and ethical forms of leadership, leaving gaps in understanding the antagonistic, dark side of leadership. Research on abusive and authoritarian leadership styles has existed since the 1970s. However, the study of toxic leadership has been introduced over the past few decades.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is the toxic triangle model and the toxic leadership process to understand the impacts of toxic leaders in the workplace and the methods they use. The toxic triangle comprises toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive work environments that promote toxicity in the workplace (Padilla et al., 2007). The toxic leadership process guides the discussion, which, according to Milosevic et al. (2020), toxic leaders use to shield their competence and exert control/dominance over followers. In this process, toxic leaders engage in upward and downward influence attempts, creating a toxic environment that hinders organizational performance.

Understanding toxic leaders' behavior can be the key to processes that manage and identify them. The toxic triangle model provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of toxic leadership and the path it takes throughout an organization. Chen and Sun (2021) reiterated the model's validity and highlighted the importance of addressing all three components—leaders, followers, and environments—to manage and mitigate toxic leadership's effects effectively. Insights gained allow organizations to identify potential toxic leaders, support susceptible followers, and foster a healthy organizational culture. Toxic leadership is a prevalent problem experienced in all facets of society, from the healthcare industry to corporations, higher education, the military, the media, and even nonprofit organizations. Toxic leadership needs breeding grounds to exist, and if not monitored, it can cause havoc in the workplace with increased turnover, absenteeism, and drastically reduced performance. The three facets of the toxic triangle work in concert for toxic leadership to flourish because they provide an

environment allowing the behaviors and abuse from the toxic leader to go unreported and unchecked.

The behaviors of toxic leaders and their impacts on organizations are vast, with many still learning how deep the toxicity penetrates. Many toxic leaders are only detected once an organization becomes toxic and dysfunctional due to the ability of these leaders to gain senior management positions and surround themselves with submissive, susceptible employees (Vreja et al., 2016). With the right mix, followers may begin to consider the behaviors of toxic leaders acceptable, making toxic leaders' behaviors contagious and hard to detect for remediation or removal. Recent research, such as the study by Bublitz-Berg et al. (2024), extends the understanding of the toxic triangle by exploring how employees perceive and respond to toxic leadership. The study identifies three distinct perceptions of responses to toxic leadership: (a) suffer in silence, (b) confront and advocate, and (c) quiet yet concerned. The research indicates that it is necessary to understand the dynamics of follower responses and the conditions that enable toxic leadership.

Organizations must promote conducive environments for collaboration, cooperation, and innovation while ensuring leaders are trained to maintain them. The relationships between leadership and subordinates affect employees' experiences on the job, which can be used to realize the existence of a toxic leader within an organization (Shkoler et al., 2019). A toxic leader introduces conflict and CWBs into this environment, using conflict, bullying, and workplace aggression, limiting followers' ability to perform functions. Workplace bullying hinders employee well-being, affecting

the organization on multiple levels. It is best conceptualized by examining elements of frequency: persistency, hostility, and power imbalance (Williams, 2018). Workplace bullying is a prevalent issue in the United States, with significant portions of the workforce affected. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (2021), 30% of American adults have experienced abusive conduct at work, 19% have witnessed it, and 66% are aware that workplace bullying occurs. Internationally, between 3% and 4% of employees have been found to suffer from severe workplace bullying, while between 9% and 15% have suffered from workplace bullying occasionally (Vukelić et al., 2019). These statistics highlight the widespread nature of workplace bullying and underscore the importance of addressing toxic leadership to foster healthier work environments.

The approach is to better understand the management aspects of toxic leadership due to the considerable impacts on the work environment and employees' well-being. The toxic triangle model was used to explain how, at times, even when action is taken by an organization, including removing toxic leaders, removing toxic followers, or meditating on the damaging parts of the organizational culture, the toxicity still exists in the workplace. Toxic leaders interfere with their followers' ability to perform work similarly to ways in which poison impacts one's ability to function (Milosevic et al., 2020). The behaviors of toxic leaders aim to destroy the follower and the workplace environment by obliterating harmony and collaboration. Managing toxic leaders and the negative consequences of this leadership style requires efforts from stakeholders, including senior management, followers, and the toxic leader. The toxic triangle model was used to construct an understanding of the dynamics creating organizational toxicity

by evaluating processes that mediate between followers and toxic leaders. The comprehensiveness of this model and its ability to assist researchers in understanding the toxic cycle was logical to frame for this study.

The Toxic Triangle

The toxic triangle of the workplace is a model consisting of toxic leaders, toxic work environments, and toxic followers (Padilla et al., 2007). Padilla et al. theorized that each factor of the triangle perpetuates the cycle of toxicity for any organization, which means that one factor of the model can start the cycle and lead to breeding further toxicity. Toxic leadership is rarely absolutely or entirely destructive; however, in concert with followers and environmental settings, toxic leaders add to the perpetuity of the toxic triangle model (Padilla et al., 2007). It would be difficult for a toxic leader to succeed in a stable organization with checks and balances. The longstanding impact of toxic leaders within an organization is the resulting toxic organizational culture, increasing the likelihood of more toxic leaders (Erickson et al., 2015).

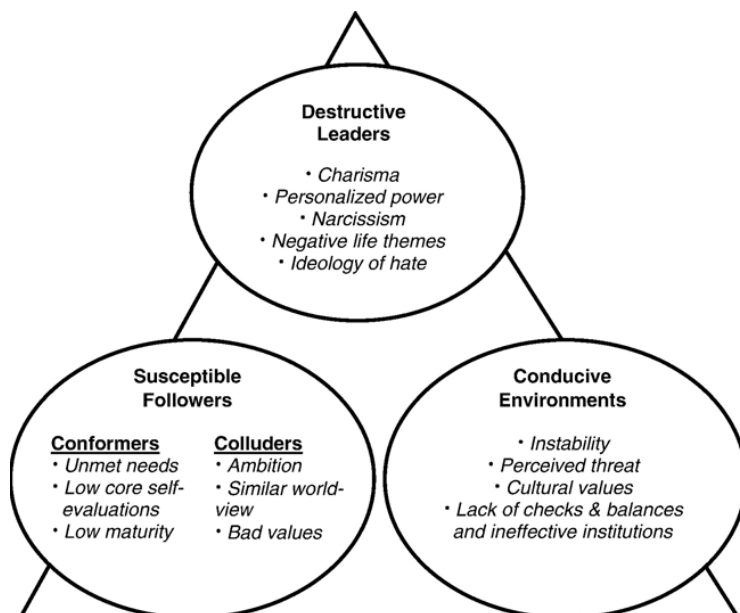
Organizational toxicity can severely impact an organization's functionality by destabilizing it and affecting employees. When employees are preoccupied with surviving in the toxic environment rather than performing their work or do not believe their rights and team are safeguarded, they will no longer support their employer. The harm can be extensive because as toxicity infiltrates other areas within the organization, it becomes increasingly difficult to mitigate the effects, and the consequences can be long-lasting (Hoppe, 2021). Researchers agree that toxic leadership does not happen in a

vacuum; the toxic leader needs power, followers, and an unchecked workplace environment to toxify the organization (Mackey et al., 2020)

The toxic triangle (see Figure 1) is a concerted system to systematically toxify an organization. Toxic conduct is particularly troublesome in leadership because leaders mediate between organizations and employees to ensure they operate correctly. When toxic leaders use their power to achieve personal ambitions and professional advancement while neglecting the well-being of employees and the business, dissent grows among the team, and the organizational culture suffers (Hoppe, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to address the shortcomings of the research on toxic leadership by determining how organizations can be detoxed of their toxicity.

Figure 1

The Toxic Triangle



Literature Review

Toxic leadership is a critical issue in contemporary organizational studies, strongly affecting employee well-being, organizational culture, and overall performance. Defined by behaviors such as manipulation, authoritarianism, and narcissism, toxic leadership undermines followers' efforts and deteriorates the organizational climate. Discussions on toxic leadership date back to the 1990s; initial research highlighted the detrimental effects of leaders who place personal gain above the well-being of their teams and organizations. This literature review explores the multifaceted nature of toxic leadership, tracing its definitions, characteristics, and impacts and examining strategies for its identification and management to mitigate organizational toxicity.

The literature review begins by defining toxic leadership and detailing its key characteristics, drawing on historical sources. The review then delves into the conceptual framework that shaped the understanding of this phenomenon, particularly the toxic triangle model. The subsequent sections examine the extensive impacts of toxic leadership on employee well-being and organizational performance, highlighting empirical findings from diverse organizational contexts. Furthermore, strategies for identifying and managing toxic leaders are explored, emphasizing the importance of early detection, leadership development programs, and supportive organizational policies. The review also considers the role of organizational culture and structural changes in mitigating the effects of toxic leadership. By synthesizing existing research and identifying gaps for future study, the literature review aims to provide a comprehensive

understanding of toxic leadership and offer practical recommendations for fostering healthier, more productive work environments.

Leadership

Leadership serves as one of the most critical roles in business today. Therefore, companies must be competent to select and train future leaders to ensure the company's long-term viability. It has been suggested that the study of leadership is the most significant issue in human sciences research (Boddy, 2017). Leadership is critical to the success of any company, and research has shown a link between leadership and organizational performance (Ezerdi & Ünluaslan, 2020). Kotter (2017) discovered that leaders must connect organizational goals with employee goals to create a shared strategic direction for the organization; this varies significantly from management, despite much of the previous research believing that the two are complementary. R. Hogan et al. (1994) found that there are 14 comprehensive categories of evaluating leader behavior, including planning and organizing, problem-solving, clarifying, informing, monitoring, motivating, consulting, recognizing, supporting, managing conflict and team building, networking, delegating, developing and mentoring, and rewarding.

Organizations increasingly invest in influential leaders to gain competitive advantage and surpass performance goals (Jiatong et al., 2022). Organizations have recognized that individual leaders significantly impact their employees' psychological well-being, job performance, and organizational commitment. Brown et al. (2005) argued that good ethical leadership leaves teams feeling supported, motivated, and committed. Leadership is the primary enabler for organizations to function effectively, directing,

inspiring, and coordinating the efforts of individuals, teams, and organizations toward realizing collective goals (Boamah et al., 2018). Leadership is necessary for organizations to perform effectively by directing, motivating, and managing the efforts of employees and teams toward achieving collective goals (Boamah et al., 2018). It is the most impactful function to organizations, leading to the continued study of its positive, ethical, and authentic forms. Farid et al. (2020) found that authentic leaders create a healthy organizational structure by practicing positive, transparent, and ethical practices with their subordinates, leading to subordinates following in concert.

Organizations are responsible for developing and implementing their strategic direction while ensuring their chosen leaders are aligned. According to Alharbi (2021), the four elements necessary for an effective leadership strategy include leading change, shaping culture, leveraging polarities, and spinning organizational boundaries. Influential leaders can permeate the organizational culture by leading by example and maintaining ethical behaviors while encouraging their teams to do so. Leaders are a critical link between organizational effectiveness and employee performance (García-Morales et al., 2012). Leaders influence job productivity, satisfaction, turnover, and, ultimately, the organization's overall performance. Many researchers have found direct correlations between organizations' culture and ethical leadership, concluding that ethical and practical leadership contributes to a healthy, positive, collaborative culture. Stahl and De Luque (2014) found that by exploring the leadership aspects of avoiding harm or the proscriptive morality framework and doing good or the prescriptive morality framework,

the authors found that combining them with the organizational culture is the primary driver behind the responsible leader's interaction with peers and performance.

Exploring responsible leadership is essential to the research due to the increase in toxic leaders and organizations having limited methods to restore balance and remediate the destruction. The study of successful management and leadership methodologies remains prevalent in the literature, and research on destructive leadership styles, including toxic leadership, has emerged in the past few decades. It is equally as important to understand effective leadership to develop future leaders as it is to identify the behaviors of leaders who knowingly inflict harm on their followers. The study of toxic leadership that includes aspects such as abusive supervision, workplace bullying, follower harassment, increased workplace stress, and unhappiness has been underexplored in leadership research (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014).

Toxic Leadership

The definition of toxic leadership has evolved through various studies, each contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this detrimental phenomenon in organizational settings. Lipman-Blumen (2004) described toxic leaders as individuals who engage in destructive behaviors that harm their followers and the organization. Boddy (2011) described toxic leadership as manipulating others, lacking empathy, and often engaging in unethical behavior for personal gain. Gupta and Chawla (2024) define toxic leadership as a destructive leadership style characterized by behaviors that harm organizational culture, employee well-being, and productivity. Gandolfi and Stone (2022) defined toxic leadership as a pattern of deliberate or inadvertent actions that demoralize

and inhibit followers from trying to fulfill the organization's mission and vision. Overall, these studies collectively define toxic leadership as a multifaceted phenomenon that includes a range of destructive behaviors and leadership styles.

Toxic leadership has existed in organizations and societies since the dawn of leadership, with a history full of stories of leaders who have displayed toxic behaviors to fulfill personal needs. Lemon and Barnes (2021) examined workplace bullying from toxic leaders among faculty in academic settings and found that higher education institutions are particularly vulnerable due to their structures and cultures. Hinen (2020) highlighted that toxic leadership in the military often originated as narcissistic and megalomaniac tendencies, characterized by domineering and power-obsessed behaviors. Many corporate scandals and catastrophic failures at corporations such as Enron, WorldCom, and Lehman Brothers, among others, have been recently found to be attributed to behaviors of toxic leaders (Boddy, 2017). Leaders are vital to organizations and directly correlate to organizational effectiveness and performance, whereas toxic leaders can incapacitate an organization (Jiatong et al., 2022).

Much of the past research called to promote the good, ideal, and ethical forms of leadership, leaving gaps in understanding the antagonistic, dark side of leadership. Research on abusive and authoritarian leadership styles has existed since the 1970's. The concept of toxic leadership was first prominently discussed in the mid-1990s, with early research by Wicker (1996) and Lipman-Blumen (2004) describing it as a leadership style that harms subordinates and the organization. Initial studies highlighted the charismatic yet destructive nature of toxic leaders who manipulate followers for personal gain. As

research on this topic expanded, the toxic triangle model introduced by (Padilla et al., 2007) provided a comprehensive framework for understanding toxic leadership. The model posits that toxic leadership arises from the cyclic interaction between destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments.

Toxic leadership has grown in interest in the current literature as researchers seek answers to understand how these individuals function and affect the organization. Toxic leadership describes leaders employing a series of deliberate behaviors that are unpredictable, dysfunctional, abusive, and self-serving and exhibit personality traits of intimidation, bullying, manipulation, or aggression to bully employees into following their demands (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). The current research has investigated how leadership can either alleviate or introduce toxicity to the organizational culture, but what needs to be added are the strategies organizations use to regain control after destruction (Boddy, 2017).

The concept of toxic leadership is broad because it encompasses both toxic and non-toxic personnel and spectators. The thinking behind this broader construct is due to the emotional/psychological residue left by toxic leaders that permeate through the organization, leaving most, if not all, employees negatively impacted (Ortega, 2019). Similarly, a study by Burns (2017) described this concept of toxic leadership as demotivational. The prevalence of toxic leadership is much more prevalent than most researchers initially thought. According to a nationwide survey, up to 67% of employees have disengaged from their leadership due to actions by toxic leaders (Gallup, 2017). Toxic leadership has an increased likelihood of causing devastating consequences for

organizations, necessitating additional research to gain a better understanding of its presence, makeup, and preventive measures that can be used to mitigate the risks and lay the groundwork for effective leadership within an organization (Singh et al., 2018). With the ability to impact organizations this greatly, further research is needed to provide remediation strategies.

Toxic leaders are primarily focused on maintaining power and control, while the actions they take to maintain this are referred to as the toxic leadership process. The toxic leadership process can provide context to the drivers behind some toxic actions taken by the toxic leader. These behaviors are considered toxic because they generate uncertainty, making it difficult for employees (subordinates and superiors) to assess the toxic leader's expertise (Milosevic et al., 2020). These tactics ultimately lead to them maintaining power longer, exacerbating the toxicity of the organization via political manipulation and bullying. A study by Milosevic et al. (2020) found toxic leaders shield their lack of expertise to maintain their position of control through influence towards superiors (i.e., selective information sharing) and influence toward subordinates (i.e., such as limiting teamwork collaboration and micromanaging) to keep their position of control.

The Toxic Leader

The term toxic leader was initially coined by Wicker (1996), where early research investigated bullying and other dysfunctional behaviors, including malcontent and malevolent occurring at their hands. The toxic leader has been referenced by many names throughout the literature, including corporate psychopath, dark leader, destructive leader, and dark triad leader (Boddy et al., 2010; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al.,

2016). Throughout the literature, the definition of toxic leaders has evolved. Lipman-Blumen (2004) denoted it as leaders who violate basic human rights standards and leave followers in worse conditions than before their reign. Schmidt (2008) found toxic leaders are best described as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision” (p. 57). Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) described toxic leaders as those employing a series of deliberate behaviors that are unpredictable, dysfunctional, abusive, and self-serving and exhibit personality traits of intimidation, bullying, manipulation, or aggression to bully employees into following their demands. Thoroughgood et al. (2016) described toxic leaders as having an insatiable desire for power and disregarding the methods it takes to achieve it.

Schmidt (2008) found that there are five dimensions of toxic leadership, including abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. For this dissertation, the toxic leader must display all five characteristics. The research contends that these five dimensions significantly correlate to followers’ job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Increased psychopathic traits in these individuals are attributable to the use of harsh tactics of bullying and threats, increasing the likelihood of CWBs (Jonason et al., 2012). The literature illustrates that individuals with high levels of negative behavioral traits are more likely to inflict harm and threaten other employees in the workplace (Ellen et al., 2021).

Many toxic leaders exhibit negative behavior traits, including charisma, fearlessness, and an inclination to take calculated risks for personal gain (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). Toxic leaders can cunningly deceive, control, and inflict fear while

safeguarding themselves from punishment (Manaa, 2022). The toxic leader will alter the use of brutal bullying tactics and threats to subtler manipulations when selfish goals are met, calling for the need to understand their evolution and detection (Boddy, 2017).

Toxic leaders have been found to cause organizations to lose revenue due to their abusive supervision, causing decreased employee performance and productivity (Leon-Perez et al., 2015). D'Souza and Lima (2015) investigated the relationship between toxic leaders' behavioral traits and opportunistic decision-making, finding that they are more inclined to make business decisions that benefit their self-interests. Traits such as narcissism, authoritarianism, and bullying are central to toxic leadership (Gupta & Chawla, 2024).

The recurring themes across the literature include narcissism, authoritarianism, bullying, abusive supervision, and the creation of a hostile work environment, explicitly highlighting the pervasive and damaging effects of toxic leadership.

Toxic leaders are primarily focused on maintaining power and control, while the actions they take to maintain this are referred to as the toxic leadership process. The toxic leadership process can provide context to the drivers behind some toxic actions taken by the toxic leader. These behaviors are considered toxic because they generate uncertainty, making it difficult for employees (subordinates and superiors) to assess the toxic leader's expertise (Milosevic et al., 2020). These tactics ultimately lead to them maintaining power longer, exacerbating the toxicity of the organization via political manipulation and bullying. A study by Milosevic et al. (2020) found toxic leaders shield their lack of expertise to maintain their position of control through influence towards superiors (i.e.,

selective information sharing) and influence toward subordinates (i.e., such as limiting teamwork collaboration and micromanaging) to keep their position of control.

Theories Impacting Toxic Leadership

Addressing the pervasive toxic leadership issue, which manifests through manipulative, authoritarian, and narcissistic behavior, requires a thorough understanding of the dynamics within leader-follower relationships. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and social exchange theory (SET) provide valuable frameworks for examining these dynamics. LMX theory highlights the importance of high-quality interactions between leaders and subordinates and how these interactions can buffer against toxic leadership's negative impacts. On the other hand, SET focuses on the reciprocal nature of social interactions, where the balance of give-and-take is crucial for maintaining healthy relationships. Integrating insights from both LMX and SET allows for a comprehensive exploration of how toxic leadership disrupts these essential relational exchanges and what strategies can be employed to mitigate its detrimental effects on organizational environments. The theories mentioned above collectively provide valuable perspectives on how toxic behaviors develop, how they impact leader-follower relationships, and what strategies can be employed to mitigate their detrimental effects on organizational environments. Understanding the intersection of these theories and toxic leadership is pivotal for developing effective interventions and fostering a healthier, more productive workplace.

Social Exchange Theory

SET is a foundational framework in organizational behavior that explains social behavior regarding the exchange of resources between individuals. Based on the foundational works of sociologists Blau and Homans, SET is a social interaction, which is a transaction where individuals seek to maximize their benefits while minimizing costs (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The theory emphasizes the importance of reciprocity, trust, and mutual benefit, essential for maintaining healthy and productive relationships within organizations. SET has been widely applied to understand the dynamics of leader-follower relationships, highlighting how positive and negative exchanges can significantly impact organizational outcomes (Cropanzano et al., 2017). In organizational settings, SET highlights the significance of the quality of exchanges between leaders and followers and how these exchanges impact overall organizational outcomes.

SET provides a valuable lens for examining leadership behaviors, particularly in distinguishing between ethical and toxic leadership, by reviewing the health of employee exchanges. Toxic leadership disrupts social exchanges by introducing elements of manipulation, authoritarianism, and self-interest, which erode trust and create imbalances in the relationship dynamics essential for positive interactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Toxic leaders treat specific followers favorably to secure loyalty and compliance while withholding them from others to maintain control and dominance. Toxic leadership disrupts these exchanges by introducing behaviors that undermine trust and reciprocity, damaging employees and the organization (Nielsen et al., 2020). Research has shown that toxic leaders manipulate social exchanges to create dependency and fear among their

followers. Toxic leaders may offer rewards or support to a few team members to foster loyalty while employing threats and punishments to control the rest (Saleem, Malik, Asif, et al., 2022). Manipulating the exchange in this manner ensures that the leader's authority remains unchallenged and fosters an environment of distrust and competition among employees. Concerning SET, toxic leadership disrupts four critical factors: communication, cultural alignment, team capability, and commitment, leading to mistrust, reduced collaboration, fear-based cultures, demoralized teams, high turnover, disengagement, and project failure (Wijesinghe et al., 2024).

SET has been widely applied across various fields, including organizational behavior, management, sociology, and psychology, to understand employee behaviors and leadership dynamics. Kilroy et al. (2023) investigated the role of frontline managers using SET and introduced the "zone of reciprocity" to describe the dynamic nature of workplace exchanges. The study found that supportive frontline manager behaviors enhance organizational citizenship behaviors and employee commitment. In contrast, toxic behaviors disrupt these exchanges, leading to adverse outcomes and highlighting the critical impact of frontline managers on organizational performance (Kilroy et al., 2023). SET offers a valuable lens for identifying and understanding the signals of toxic leadership. Organizations can detect early warning signs by focusing on the disruption of trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit and take corrective actions to foster a healthier and more productive work environment.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

LMX theory examines the quality of relationships between leaders and their subordinates. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by trust, respect, and mutual obligation, leading to positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Conversely, low-quality exchanges are marked by limited trust and support, resulting in adverse employee outcomes. The theory emphasizes that the varying quality of relationships leaders establish with different subordinates can significantly impact organizational dynamics and individual performance. Toxic leadership behaviors, including micromanagement, narcissism, authoritarianism, and a lack of empathy, severely undermine the potential for positive LMX. Dartey-Baah et al. (2023) found that toxic leadership negatively impacts the quality of LMX relationships, highlighting that nurses subjected to toxic leadership experienced lower levels of trust, communication, and support from their leaders.

Toxic leadership significantly disrupts the formation and maintenance of high-quality LMX relationships. Toxic leaders typically engage in behaviors that undermine trust and respect, which are fundamental to high-quality LMX. Employees with high-quality exchanges may still experience the adverse impacts of toxic leadership, such as emotional exhaustion and job stress, which can diminish their overall well-being and performance (Celiker & Guzeller, 2022). Studies show that high LMX quality positively correlates with job performance, satisfaction, and organizational commitment while negatively associated with turnover intentions (Gerstner & Day, 1997). High-quality

LMX relationships can buffer against the adverse effects of toxic leadership behavior (Lyons et al., 2019). The LMX dynamic is crucial in high-stress environments such as forensic teams and healthcare settings, where the quality of LMXs can significantly influence outcomes (Dartey-Baah et al., 2023; Walker & Walker, 2013). The intersection of LMX theory and toxic leadership highlights the profound impact of toxic leadership behaviors on organizational outcomes.

According to the study (Celiker & Guzeller, 2022), toxic leadership significantly affects the quality of LMX relationships, leading to detrimental impacts on organizational citizenship behavior. LMX was the most significant predictor of organizational citizenship behavior among employees. Toxic leaders often manipulate LMX relationships to maintain control and dominance, fostering environments of fear and mistrust. Subordinates who experience low-quality exchanges with their leaders tend to exhibit CWBs and lower organizational commitment (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). The studies highlighted that employees with low LMX quality, high job stress, and emotional exhaustion due to toxic leadership are less likely to engage in organizational citizenship behavior. Celiker and Guzeller (2022) suggested that while high LMX quality can buffer some adverse effects of toxic leadership, it does not entirely mitigate them. Employees with high-quality exchanges may still experience the adverse impacts of toxic leadership, such as emotional exhaustion and job stress, which can diminish their overall well-being and performance. Newton and Perlow (2021) found that subordinates with lower-quality LMX relationships were more likely to engage in CWBs, with anger mediating this relationship, suggesting that negative emotions stemming from poor LMX lead to

organizationally detrimental behaviors. The findings emphasize the need for organizations to address toxic leadership behaviors directly rather than relying solely on enhancing LMX quality.

Financial Effects of Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership has been found to have severe effects on employees and teams and can propagate throughout organizations. Organizations can face mounting financial expenses due to the presence of a toxic leader within the workplace. According to a report by SHRM, many employees believe that culture and leadership are directly linked. The report found that 58% of employees who leave a job due to poor organizational culture blame their managers for their departure (SHRM, 2019). The financial impact of toxic leadership is significant, as abusers often compromise organizational goals for their gain, and it comes at a cost of disability claims, lost productivity due to absenteeism, and increased turnover rates (Winn & Dykes, 2019). That impact is not limited merely monetarily but resonates regarding employee morale and organizational culture. In the last 5 years, toxic leadership has led to employee turnover, costing organizations approximately \$223,000,000,000. According to a Gallup workplace study from 2013, employees affected by toxic leaders can cause a 34% loss in productivity for every \$10,000 in salary (Gallup, 2013). Financial impacts due to toxic leadership can arise from the loss of performance, causing missing financial projections; it can arise from lawsuits and arbitration fees; and increased recruitment expenses due to increased employee turnover (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Toxic Leader and Effects on Followers

As studies on toxic leadership grow, there has been a growing abundance of leaders who are perceived to be harmful to the organization and who also cause severe physical and psychological damage to their follower's subordinates. The toxic leader has been found to have detrimental effects on the organization's employees, specifically their subordinates or followers, the second facet of the toxic triangle. Workplace bullying is a growing worldwide problem as incidences of toxic leaders in the workplace increase and display negative behaviors that are extreme toward their subordinates (Hoel et al., 2010). Due to the tremendous risks to employees' health and well-being, it is necessary to identify and manage the behaviors of toxic leaders. Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015 attributed toxic leadership to employees' decreased performance and lack of motivation due to their suffering from mental stress.

Toxic leadership leads employees to engage in CWBs and is impacted by how the employee feels supported by the organization (Palmer et al., 2017). CWBs represent a group of behaviors that damage or are intended to damage the organization or the employees (Cohen et al., 2013). The frequency of CWBs by employees correlates to their perceptions of organizational commitment because organizational support can encourage employees to report toxic leaders. Toxic leaders play a large part in the toxic triangle; as their followers witness behaviors of favoritism, alienation, and bullying of their coworkers, they begin to mimic these actions out of fear of being targeted (Padilla et al., 2007). Hayes et al. (2015) found that followers who are unwilling to behave unethically face bullying from the followers, while the toxic leader promotes the behaviors.

Since leadership toxicity is based on a perceived threat to status, power, and control, the toxic leader will manipulate those around them to believe they are doing heroic work when, in reality, followers are too afraid to report it. When toxic leaders go undetected, they contribute to increased stress and burnout among employees as their actions create hostile work environments. Lipman-Blumen (2004) found that toxic leaders are masters of disguise and able to exploit followers' deep-seated psychological needs and fears to enable and abet them. Exploiting these needs is also why many followers fail to report that their leader is toxic and engaging in these behaviors.

Extant literature found that toxic leaders demonstrate tendencies of hostility (e.g., blaming others, negative feedback, anger, and gaslighting) and neuroticism or extreme moodiness. Followers of toxic leaders have reported a multitude of harmful interactions that lead to physical, emotional, psychological, and financial damage. In a study by Webster et al. (2014), participants reported suffering from physical damage (e.g., colds, gastrointestinal issues, hair loss, and headaches), emotional harm (e.g., anxiety, fear, inability to perform), and psychological harm (self-doubt, lack of confidence) as a result of their toxic leader. Toxic leaders consistently show self-centered, dysfunctional, and destructive characteristics.

Toxic leaders' behaviors include dishonesty, arrogance, intimidation, demoralizing, and undermining processes of followers that cause critical and enduring damage to organizations, individuals, and stakeholders (Lipman-Blumen, 2004). A study by K. Pelletier (2010) revealed that toxic leaders attack followers' self-esteem, cause conflict amongst team members by promoting inequality, engage in abusive supervision,

and even threaten followers. When toxic leaders are known to employees in the organization, human resource professionals tend to receive reports of behaviors that are aggressive, dishonest, arrogant, and manipulative (Landay et al., 2019). It is difficult for leadership to successfully pinpoint toxic leaders as there is no recipe for specific behaviors that make a toxic leader; it involves the overall effects of actions over time, leading to unmotivated teams and demoralizing the organizational culture (Reed, 2004). Followers of toxic leaders tend to fall into one of two categories: susceptible followers or colluder followers. The literature also explored the varied responses of followers to toxic leadership. Bublitz-Berg et al. (2024) categorized these responses into Suffer in Silence, Confront and Advocate, and Quiet yet Concerned. These responses highlight the complex dynamics between toxic leaders and their subordinates, emphasizing the importance of follower behavior and organizational context in assessing the impact of toxic leadership.

Susceptible Followers

Susceptible or conducive followers are those who are afraid to voice their opinions, coworkers, and leaders due to fear of backlash, and they are the least likely to report these behaviors to the organization (Peng et al., 2014). Suffering followers have increased chances of engaging in employee withdrawal, lowered feelings of organizational commitment, and increased turnover as they flee the organization (Boddy, 2015). Toxic leaders can adversely impact their followers' ability to think critically and efficiently problem-solve in the workplace (Li et al., 2024). Susceptible followers have an increased likelihood of workplace stress and anxiety when working with a toxic leader (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016). The anxiety and stress of working with toxic leaders can lead

to anger in susceptible employees, extending to their family and personal dealings, especially when there is no relief from the behaviors in the workplace (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016).

Research has suggested that followers who challenge toxic leaders in one-on-one settings are frequently discredited or lose their jobs, leading to fear of speaking up (Winn & Dykes, 2019). Evidence shows that followers are likely to excuse unethical behavior by appealing to a toxic leader for greater loyalty (Kalshoven et al., 2016). In effect, the susceptible employees further promote toxic leaders' actions when they remain silent and allow their actions to continue. Research evaluating the social learning theory has found evidence that destructive and ethical leadership types will promote employees' unethical and ethical actions and behaviors (Kalshoven et al., 2016). It is possible that when the toxic leader departs the organization, the susceptible followers can maintain and perpetuate their destructive behaviors (Thomas et al., 2016). New leaders may then inherit toxic supporters, known as toxic survivors, to continue the cycle of the toxic triangle.

Much of the current research indicates that the followers are responsible for dealing with the toxic leaders' destructive behaviors. Thoroughgood et al. (2016) argued that toxic leadership is correlational in that leaders, followers, and environments dictate the outcomes of toxic behaviors. Li et al. (2024) found that conducive employees will not engage in critical thinking by conforming to leaders' orders without question. Susceptible followers are often victims of domination because their fear of speaking out is often seen as cooperation and acceptance of the behaviors of toxic leaders (Johnson et al., 2019).

Some followers may think that management requests are unethical but that compliance with the demands of a toxic leader is the best or only way to avoid punishment or survival in a destructive organizational environment (Johnson et al., 2019).

Organizations are complicit in the spread of toxicity when they do not manage toxic leaders. Followers may learn that the behaviors of toxic leaders are acceptable by leaders and possibly lead to promotions if toxic leaders are not held accountable. When organizations fail to investigate claims of toxicity and abusive supervision, the likelihood of employees reporting these incidents will decrease (Hoppe, 2021). These followers become complicit in the toxic work environment as they adapt to protect themselves. The follower, part of the toxic triangle, explains that when susceptible followers are under pressure, they are more likely to maintain or encourage toxicity with their submissiveness. Webster et al. (2014) found that toxic leadership behaviors, such as manipulation, bullying, and narcissism, lead to significant psychological distress, emotional harm, and physical health problems among submissive followers. Therefore, organizations must require mechanisms for followers to report toxic leaders effectively.

Colluder Followers

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the followers, known as colluders; they have been found to internalize their values for their toxic leader's selfish ideology while actively promoting it (Dorasamy, 2018). Collusive followers support toxic leaders due to selfish interests, including promotional or financial opportunities. Colluders are persuaded to show creativity in working toward objectives that their toxic leaders wish to see accomplished without fear of punishment (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Mowchan et

al. (2015) found that followers were likelier to participate in unscrupulous dealings when subjected to toxic leadership. Collusive followers are dangerous to organizations because their actions and behaviors promote the cycle of the toxic triangle in the organization. These followers are dangerous to organizations because collusive followers have increased chances for promotions by toxic leaders for their cooperation and are breeding grounds for future toxic leaders.

Toxic leaders are not only prone to abuse their power but are more likely to successfully convince collusive followers to buy into the manipulation because they are opportunists (Thoroughgood et al., 2016). The follower's personality is critical to how poisonous the work environment is (Padilla et al., 2007). Collusive followers tend to take on similar characteristics and behaviors of the toxic leader, continuing the toxic cycle. Typically, when colluders are aligned with a toxic leader, they use the leader-member dynamic to gain favorable outcomes through that association. Collusive followers play an essential role in the persistence of toxic leaders because they give them the validity and resources needed (Milosevic et al., 2020). There is consensus among the literature related to the toxic triangle that toxic leaders, toxic environments, and toxic followers all play an interconnected role in organizational toxicity development, continuation, and counteraction (Erickson et al., 2015).

Collusive followers can also be the top leadership within the organization, especially when they fail to take responsibility for counteracting toxic behaviors. When no one feels accountable for addressing toxic conduct, avoidance techniques are used to rationalize inaction: warnings are disregarded, and repercussions are minimized or

ignored (Hoppe, 2021). A study by Hoppe (2021) found that when top management fails to address toxic leaders, they were enabled by the following factors: weak top management (58.3%), hierarchical protection of toxic leaders (55.4%), a missing error culture (50.8%) and a highly competitive environment (48.4%). Additionally, when top management prioritizes profits over their employees' well-being, the increased competition and pressure can add toxicity and dysfunctionality to the work environment.

Toxic Leaders and Workplace Impacts

The toxic workplace or organizational environment represents the final part of the toxic triangle. Current research contends that toxic leaders are bad for employees, the organization, and the culture, but there are gaps in what organizations can do to prevent or recover from them. Much of the current research includes thorough investigations of the effects of toxic leaders on the organization; however, it highlights that organizations are limited in their ability to identify and manage these leaders (Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015). Stahl and Zilinskaite's (2017) research uncovered organizational climates that provide breeding grounds for these leaders, which include poor internal governance, dysfunctional corporate culture, misaligned incentive systems, and weaknesses in group decision-making processes. Structured environments would make it difficult for a toxic leader to go undetected and easily evade responsibility. Mathieu et al. (2013) found that toxic leaders are uncomfortable in traditional organizations because they rely on managers and supervisors with checks and balances to ensure employee productivity. The literature suggests that toxic leadership thrives when these four environmental factors are

present: instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and absence of checks and balances and institutionalization (Padilla et al., 2007).

A toxic workplace is multidimensional and includes instances such as workplace ostracism, incivility, harassment, and workplace bullying by toxic leaders (Anjum et al., 2018). A toxic organizational environment represents the negative end of the spectrum and is found to have a higher likelihood of adverse outcomes for the organization. A toxic workplace damages organizational stakeholders and is characterized in the literature as being like cancer (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015). It decreases organizational outcomes while fostering toxic leaders' and followers' actions. The poison of a toxic workplace is created when employees feel bullied, harassed, or abused. Toxic work environments often lead to increased organizational costs due to loss of employee morale, increased turnover, work-life conflict, high absenteeism, poor employee health, and lowered employee productivity (Anjum et al., 2018).

Organizational Culture

The organizational culture and internal norms could be breeding grounds for leader toxicity. Organizational leadership is charged with cultivating a culture that mitigates toxicity and promotes the security and collaboration of employees. The organizational culture directly correlates to the culture, performance of organizations, and, importantly, the behaviors and attitudes of people in the organization. It represents the climate in which employees collaborate to reach common goals. According to Warrick (2017), organizational culture can considerably influence a company's performance and effectiveness, its employees' morale and productivity, and its ability to

hire, motivate, and retain talented people. Toxic leaders can and have been found to erode organizational culture over time when leadership fails to step in. Toxic leaders create environments where employees are rewarded for agreeing with them and retaliate against other followers for challenging their authority. The organizational culture is responsible for how toxic leaders act in pursuing self-interests, whether it be manipulation, threats, or lies (Palmer et al., 2017). When toxic leaders erode organizational culture, it also erodes the employees' enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy, and innovativeness.

Toxic leaders impact the organizational culture by changing the dynamics and performance of the team. These leaders elicit tactics of dissension, including creating tension within teams or singling out an employee to bully and ridicule in front of the team publicly. The team's dissension makes it difficult for subordinates to report the toxic leader's conduct, raise suggestions, or even disagree with them due to fear of retribution. Innovation begins to suffer because other points of view and feedback for improvement are discouraged. As the toxicity spreads throughout the organization, there is a decreased sense of accountability where no one wants to accept responsibility for problems, and employees begin to conform to the culture, causing the toxic system to thrive (Hoppe, 2021). As toxic leaders pursue their self-interests over organizational goals, there are increased chances to negatively impact day-to-day operations, decrease performance, and cause the organization to be dysfunctional. In an online study of 242 people, 94.2% felt toxic leadership caused dysfunctionality, compared to 4.5 % who did not think it did (Hoppe, 2021).

Conducive Environment

The adage that one bad apple spoils the bunch directly applies to toxic leaders as their behaviors can impact other employees. Toxic leaders negatively impact employees' ability to perform work, similar to how poison may interfere with an individual's ability to function, thus being considered toxic (Milosevic et al., 2020). Toxic leaders, especially in positions of power, have been found to corrupt others, leading employees to feel pressure to go along with unethical ways due to fear of retaliation (Boddy et al., 2010). Evidence shows that a toxic leader's unethical behavior trickles down the organization, leading other employees to behave less ethically. Toxic leaders in positions of power can begin to corrupt others, leading to employees feeling social pressure to go along with the corrupt ways (Boddy et al., 2010). Toxic leaders have successfully destroyed organizational culture by lowering morale, productivity, and retention rates as they spread toxic behaviors throughout the organization (Zhang & Song, 2023).

Most organization stakeholders, leaders, and scholars in academia agree that toxic leaders increase stress on employees across industries. When toxic leaders' behaviors are not taken seriously or excused due to their ability to exceed performance, toxic leadership can run rampant without punishment (Padilla et al., 2007). Ignoring the leader's toxicity leads to the degradation of the culture, illustrating systematic problems within the organizations' policies and even the human resources department (Tepper, 2000). Much of the current literature indicates that it is the responsibility of leadership to mitigate the impact of toxic leadership. Professional behaviors in the workplace should not harm employees, and organizations that allow egotistical and destructive behaviors without

punishment fail to protect employees. Toxic work environments cost the organization resources by affecting employees' well-being and health due to increased conflicts, leading to increased absenteeism and turnover (Hoppe, 2021).

Alleviating organizational toxicity is essential for ensuring employees' happiness, well-being, and safety in any company, making it an essential topic for further investigation (Li et al., 2024). Just as the organizational culture is conducive to perpetuating toxic leaders, it can also have the reverse effect of reducing it. A study by Djurkovic et al. (2021) found that organizational culture was crucial in reducing bullying and negative behaviors when the organizational leaders took responsibility for teaching employees against bullying, transparent and open communication, and leaders demonstrated positive behavioral norms in the workplace. The constant communication and reinforcement of the expected behaviors from the leadership can lead to routine adoption, ultimately impacting the organizational culture. The study also showed that employee participation directly correlated with reducing toxicity when they could participate in creating the core measures.

Factors Contributing to Organizational Toxicity

Other factors and negative workplace behaviors can contribute to organizational toxicity and exacerbate the effects of the toxic triangle. Incidents of workplace bullying, micro-aggressions, and incivility will increase as toxicity infiltrates the workplace. These factors can provide leadership with warning signs of toxicity if trained to look for it. Leaders need to understand the behaviors that contribute to organizational toxicity so that

they do not inadvertently allow it to occur, thereby contributing to the toxic culture (Kasalak, 2019).

Workplace Bullying

Research on workplace bullying has increased as researchers seek to illustrate its disastrous effects on employees and the workplace. Workplace bullying is gradual in toxifying the organizational culture through the victimization of employees. Workplace bullying is a distinct type of psychological and workplace aggression with overlapping characteristics of abusive supervision, mobbing, and harassment (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Workplace bullying has been described as more harmful than workplace incivility or social undermining, both of which are forms of workplace maltreatment. Subordinates and, ultimately, organizations can suffer negative repercussions due to workplace bullying, prompting the need to understand how to prevent it (Djurkovic et al., 2021). According to the study by Nielsen and Einarsen (2018), workplace bullying is a type of workplace harassment in which employees are subjected to three primary characteristics: (a) the individual becomes the victim of continuous and repetitive workplace abuse, (b) the exposure lasts a long time, and (c) the target feels stuck in the position and unable to flee or defend herself/himself against the ongoing harassment.

When toxic leaders engage in workplace bullying, their followers' perceptions of safety and trust are severely impacted. Thoroughgood et al. (2016) found that followers' opinions of their leaders are affected directly by the degree to which they witness abusive conduct, including toxic leaders shouting when deadlines are missed and being insulted. Past studies have estimated that 11.3% and 18.1% of employees globally have considered

themselves victims of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Workplace bullying psychologically impacts employees and leads to increased work-related stress that can impact them mentally, emotionally, and physically. Bullying in the workplace has significant ramifications for employees' mental health, including mental health consequences such as depression and burnout (Lever et al., 2019). It harms employees' physical health, ultimately affecting cardiovascular, neurological, and even muscular discomfort, increasing employee healthcare claims (Boudrias et al., 2021). The negative outcomes for the victims of workplace bullying can lead to increased employee turnover, job dissatisfaction, and decreased performance, causing increased absenteeism. Subordinates of toxic leaders have reported feelings of distress, emotional turmoil, bewilderment, fear of being singled out, mistreatment, harassment, humiliation, and hopelessness (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019).

The problem with workplace bullying is that toxic leaders engage in it to further divide and terrorize subordinates for their selfish pursuits. It is a systematic process that gradually toxifies the organization and can go undetected for quite a while. In a recent study by Djurkovic et al. (2021), the authors found that when faced with instances of bullying, human resources professionals have been described as passive, manager-centered, unsympathetic, and untrustworthy. Additionally, the findings uncovered that when confronted with employee accusations of bullying, they did nothing for months and then joined the managers in harassing the victims (Djurkovic et al., 2021).

Workplace Incivility

Workplace incivility, characterized as low-intensity deviant workplace behavior with an undefined intent to hurt, is a relatively recent addition to the research on negative workplace behavior (Tamunomiebi & Ukwuije, 2021). According to Fox et al. (2001), these deviant behaviors occur repeatedly in minor frequencies with differing intent to harm, which infringe on workplace behavioral norms of civility and respect. Researchers agree that organizational leadership must be essential in combating employees engaging in incivility. Examples of some behaviors in instances of incivility include talking down to others, making demeaning remarks, and purposely ignoring someone (Porath et al., 2015). Incivility further intensifies organizational toxicity because it uses repetitive and varying frequencies of negative behavior against a coworker or supervisor that include disrespecting, insulting, degrading, and belligerent treatment in the workplace (Rasool et al., 2021). Incivility leads to an unhealthy and toxic organizational environment that adversely impacts employees' health and performance when left unchecked.

It is important to note that other negative workplace behaviors, including aggression, bullying, and abusive supervision, are more explicit. Therefore, the behaviors are easily distinguishable from incivility as it is seen as intentional harm by the victims (Schilpzand et al., 2016). The low severity and ambiguous intent to harm are essential aspects of workplace incivility that help to distinguish it from other negative workplace behaviors. These distinctions are significant because incivility is a growing concern within the realm of negative workplace behavior. After all, it is likely to trigger distinct feelings and behaviors in the targets of incivility as compared to victims of other forms of

negative workplace behaviors (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Incivility is also becoming increasingly more common, as 98% of employees have been found to experience incivility in the workplace, with 50% of them stating they experience it routinely (Porath & Pearson, 2012). These numbers are astounding because, unlike cases of sexual harassment and bullying, there are no clear regulations addressing workplace incivility, so it sometimes remains unreported before the problem spirals out of control (Banks et al., 2018).

Organizations face rising costs in performance because incivility contributes to decreasing performance, innovation, and retention (Porath et al., 2015). As such, it is an increasing concern for organizations looking to retain high-performing employees due to its potentially disastrous effects when left unchecked (Porath et al., 2015). Workplace incivility can lead to increased rates of voluntary employee turnover and increased chances for organizational toxicity, which can significantly impact organizational performance (Selden & Sowa, 2015). Severe consequences to the dynamics of teams are likely to arise when incivility goes unchecked, contributing to organizational toxicity. When employees witness their peers engage in incivility without punishment, they are more likely to engage in those same behaviors, expanding the group of uncivil employees (Saleem, Malik, Hyder, et al., 2022). According to Schilpzand et al. (2016), one uncivil team member can negatively impact group-level incivility and lead to increased turnover intentions, burnout, and job satisfaction of the entire team.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions have been defined in research as any underlying, systemic, or blatant aggression toward individuals or groups (Cortina et al., 2017). The aggression could be a statement, gesture, or event of indirect, subtle, or unintended prejudice against a minority community, which, in isolation, is harmless. However, compounding over time leads to organizational toxicity. Unlike overt and deliberate bigotry, microaggression is much more difficult to detect and mitigate (Fattoracci & King, 2023). Microaggression often derives from societal values and habits cultivated over time (Cortina et al., 2017). Microaggressions include ethnicity, age, and gender inequality, in which negative views such as women's inferiority to men or the assumption that older adults cannot contribute to contemporary society are reinforced (Prieto et al., 2016). Microaggressions become acceptable in corporate culture as employees perpetuate them in the workplace, and leadership fails to step in and mitigate them properly, eventually leading to toxic work environments (Starr-Glass, 2017).

Toxic leaders are often at the center of microaggressions, in which they harass employees who do not fit within their model, either consciously or indirectly, by using their authority and position within the organizational hierarchy (Burns, 2017). Toxic leaders sometimes engage in indirect ways of weakening their victims by using violent but seemingly innocent words, tone, and body language. Microaggressions can negatively affect employees' emotional and psychological well-being and ability to perform (Fattoracci & King, 2023). Long-term exposure to microaggression can result in an organizational culture that tolerates and perpetuates a cycle of organizational toxicity.

Employees subjected to constant microaggressions will experience decreased confidence in their leadership trust, possibly making them feel defenseless against the perpetrator (Fattoracci & King, 2023). Microaggressions are more likely to exacerbate toxicity in the workplace the longer company leaders take to deal with them, leading employees to believe they will face retaliation or no action if reported to their leaders (Cortina et al., 2017). When leaders fail to address toxicity via microaggressions, there are increased worker-related problems, such as depression and high workforce turnover, which may harm the organization's productivity. Organizational leaders must be aware of workplace microaggressions and find constructive ways to address them before they negatively impact their employees' well-being and the company (Boddy, 2015).

This study will use the case presented by Milosevic et al. (2020), detailing the dynamics of the toxic leadership process and how it aids in toxifying the organization. The authors postulated three elements of the process: the intent, the influence, and the follower's response, which work in concert to toxify the organization. Toxic leaders use the toxic leadership process to conceal their incompetence and preserve their position of control, typically at the expense of organizational goals (Milosevic et al., 2020). The authors also found that in differentiating toxic leaders from destructive ones through intent to harm, toxic leaders do not explicitly intend to harm but hide incompetence.

Gaps in the Literature

The detrimental consequences of a toxic leader on a team, an employee, and an organization have been studied extensively, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The gap in the literature that served as the basis for this research was the minimal research on

organizations identifying and managing toxic leaders, especially when subordinates fail to report complaints. Toxic leaders are incredibly destructive to organizations by controlling employees through fear and engaging in abusive and bullying behaviors. Additionally, the toxic leader can potentially cost organizations significant amounts of money through lost revenues, fraud, lawsuits, or missed opportunities through increased employee turnover (Boddy, 2017). In educational settings, Snow et al. (2021) linked toxic leadership to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and burnout among staff (Labrague, 2021) discussed the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on workforce outcomes and patient safety in nursing, illustrating the cross-industry relevance of this phenomenon.

There is a benefit in gathering information on how companies detect and handle toxic leaders. Toxic leaders negatively impact employee productivity, employee morale, and organizational effectiveness. There is a lack of data on the effectiveness of the methods employed to handle the organization's toxic situations. Boddy et al. (2010) found that toxic leaders tend to gravitate to organizations where they can quickly gain money and power. Therefore, organizations require strategies to intervene and resolve the tension that the toxic leader has generated. In the fast-paced global market, toxic leaders have many opportunities to gain employment because organizations cannot detect this through interviewing. Hoppe (2021) found that as toxic leaders' existence is realized in the organization, they quickly jump ship to the following organization, further fueling the cycle of toxicity. Researchers have argued over whether toxic leaders should be screened into or out of organizations since it supports the notion that they are ultimately harmful to the organizations in which they work (Boddy, 2017). In a case study, Boddy (2017)

found that toxic leaders are said to be parasitic, feeding off the excellent work of others while striking fear into the team.

Existing research is lacking in reporting early toxic leadership detection by employees within the organization (Webster et al., 2014). Research has not yet provided a successful model for studies on toxic leadership investigating its long-term outcomes of organizational performance and employee well-being by follow-up measurements over several years. Such studies could offer a more nuanced understanding of how continued toxic behavior affects the turnover rate, satisfaction with work, and organizational culture over time (Milosevic et al., 2020). Strategies for decreasing organizational toxicity are necessary, as the research illustrates that many of these leaders are not caught during standard interviews. In interviews, toxic leaders are viewed as most impressive because they are willing to lie about their accomplishments and appear to possess the competencies, values, and workforce engagement qualities that illustrate good leadership (Boddy et al., 2010).

Mitigating Toxicity

There remains a considerable lack of understanding of toxic leaders and how to hold them accountable in the literature (Padilla et al., 2007). Research has shown that toxic leadership significantly impedes organizational culture, staff morale, and performance in several industries. Resolving toxic leadership necessitates a comprehensive strategy that includes identifying the problem early on, implementing effective interventions, and establishing robust employee support systems. Regrettably, there have been limited empirical examinations of interventions explicitly targeting toxic

behaviors and their impact on the broader organizational culture. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct further studies on leadership coaching in mentorship programs as an intervention strategy (Satiani & Satiani, 2022).

Toxic leadership poses a substantial obstacle in organizational contexts, affecting the well-being of individual employees and the overall vitality and effectiveness of the company. The problem of toxic leaders stems from the lack of tools to enforce their accountability, inefficient frameworks to detect their harmful behaviors early, and inadequate reporting methods. The traits contribute to toxic leadership's persistent and unchecked nature (Webster et al., 2014). To effectively tackle the extensive and harmful impact of toxic leadership behaviors, such as abusive supervision, authoritarianism, and narcissism, it is imperative to employ a holistic strategy that involves identifying, handling, and reducing their adverse consequences. Swiftly identifying and consistently monitoring toxic leaders is paramount to proactively mitigate their detrimental impact and prevent their proliferation inside an organization (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020).

Implementing and following organizational norms and external regulatory frameworks is essential to prevent or minimize the emergence of toxic leadership. The contribution of organizational policies and external regulatory frameworks to prevent or reduce toxic leadership warranted further investigation. Organizational strategies that include accountability policies and structural changes can help promote positive leadership behaviors and combat toxic ones (Milosevic et al., 2020). Implementing policies that ensure fairness and reporting and resolving abusive behaviors might help develop a healthier organizational climate (Labrague, 2021). Lipman-Blumen (2004)

outlined critical strategies for surviving toxic leaders: facing one's anxiety to confront mistreatment; increasing value by taking on additional responsibility within the organization; being proactive and not relying on the leader; and seeing through false promises from the leader. The strategies focused on building resilience with followers so they can recognize and report toxicity versus becoming colluders or susceptible to it.

A specific method was first proposed by Wicker (1996), suggesting that solutions for toxicity include acknowledging toxic leadership as a severe organizational health issue and then addressing the behaviors of toxic leaders through open discussions about mistreatment, seeking professional intervention by establishing channels where harmful behavior may be reported safely within the organization; and maintaining detailed logs on abusive encounters so steps to rectify detrimental behaviors were recorded. While the steps outlined above provide a solid foundation to enable organizations to navigate toxic leadership, additional research is needed to evaluate whether they are as effective as hypothesized. Furthering this research, Tavanti (2008) suggested a survival guide for followers working with toxic leaders. However, the advice focused on followers coping with toxicity but not organizational remedies to address it. Subsequent research is needed to investigate ways to help empower followers to report and a collective process within the organization against toxic leadership.

Toxic leadership poses a considerable problem since it impacts employees' well-being while reducing organizational health and productivity. Toxic leaders typically display abusive supervision, authoritarianism, and narcissistic tendencies that lead to significant delays in detecting them. Satiani and Satiani (2022) found that toxic leaders

cause low employee morale, increased dysfunctionality, and decreased productivity while hunting for personal gain. Therefore, tackling these attributes requires an all-inclusive approach to recognizing mitigation measures anywhere they occur. Studies have also shown that toxic leaders should be detected early and monitored over time to prevent their harmful effects from embedding into the organization and affecting others (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). An action plan is required to combat toxic leadership, which needs an early diagnosis, overall surveillance, and preventive interventions.

Toxic leaders will inevitably be picked up in the hiring process, but this can be prevented with psychological screenings and interviews that identify toxic leadership attributes. Satiani and Satiani (2022) highlighted the significance of 360-degree evaluations, which involve soliciting feedback from supervisors, peers, subordinates, and self-assessments. Identifying and managing toxic leaders requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that analyzes the impact of potential leaders within the organization and evaluates current leaders. Moreover, having clear rules and processes to address harmful behavior is critical for organizations. That means making sure every complaint is carefully documented and investigated. Proactively taking these steps would enable identifying potential toxic leaders and managing them appropriately before they affect the organizational climate (Padilla et al., 2007).

Efficient accountability methods encompass thorough performance assessments that integrate input from diverse sources within the organization. A systematic approach is necessary to address toxic leadership, which involves identifying, monitoring, counseling, and, if needed, removing toxic leaders. Enacting these strategies can assist

firms in reducing the adverse effects of toxic leadership and cultivating a nurturing and efficient workplace environment (Satiani & Satiani, 2022). Research suggests that real-time monitoring of all leaders within the organization, including 360-degree feedback during performance reviews, can be beneficial in identifying toxic leadership. Frequent monitoring can lead to a culture of accountability and transparency, which is necessary for an effective working atmosphere (Atwater & Brett, 2005). Additional research is required to authenticate these measures and investigate further approaches to holding toxic leaders accountable.

Despite the wide range of strategies for handling and alleviating toxic leadership and its impact, much research is still required to rate these solutions and explore others. Organizations across all industries need to be places where employees can thrive and contribute positively without having toxic leaders around them. With proven approaches and safe working conditions, employees' health can be safeguarded even as long-term survival is facilitated within organizations. The multifaceted problem of toxic leadership will only be combated through a clear-sighted worsening method that strengthens early detection systems, emphasizing tracking and amplifying effective practices targeting the various factors. Organizations should, therefore, intervene and make strategic changes to limit the spread of toxic leadership behaviors, support employee well-being, and promote a healthy organizational climate.

Summary and Conclusions

All three parts of the toxic triangle were discussed while explaining how, individually and collectively, they promote toxicity within the organization. The literature

discussed in this chapter included the definition of toxic leadership and the adverse effects the toxic leader has on followers, teams, and, ultimately, the organization. The literature review has shown that the toxic triangle is a sufficient framework and taxonomy for researching effective methods to manage and identify toxic leaders. This chapter's discussion was grounded in the definition of toxic leadership and the five dimensions: (a) abusive supervision, (b) authoritarian behaviors, (c) narcissism, (d) unpredictability, and (e) self-promotion. There is consensus in the literature that toxic leaders destroy organizations and the culture. Many organizations cannot determine when the workplace is toxic and when to step in, ultimately allowing chaos to consume the workplace. Researchers have indicated the need to counter organizational toxicity, suggesting that leaders can be screened for negative personality behaviors (Boddy, 2015).

The literature on toxic leadership underscores its profound impact on organizational health and employee well-being. This review provides a comprehensive understanding of toxic leadership by integrating models like the toxic triangle with empirical findings from diverse contexts. Addressing the challenges posed by toxic leadership requires a multifaceted approach that includes early identification, targeted interventions, and systemic changes to foster healthier organizational environments. This study was needed because understanding the toxic leader is necessary for the global economy; unethical leadership has been proven to have devastating effects on organizations, employees, and even societies.

In the upcoming chapter, I will comprehensively explain the chosen research methodology for this study. The chapter will delve into various aspects, including the

rationale behind the research design, the researcher's role, methodology details such as the participant selection logic, step-by-step processes for recruitment, participation, and data collection, and a detailed outline of the data analysis plan. The concept of ensuring the study's reliability and credibility will be explored, encompassing factors such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Additionally, the ethical procedures employed in the study will be thoroughly addressed and discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on effectively identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity. The continued rise in corporate failures due to toxic leaders and organizational toxicity is astounding. The phenomenon of toxic leadership has triggered an intense need to understand how and why these leaders primarily have gone undetected while wrecking devastation on employees. This study used an electronic-based Delphi technique known as the *e-Delphi* to address this gap in the literature (Cole et al., 2013). A panel of experts was convened to answer the research questions and provide rich data on effectively mitigating organizational toxicity. The Delphi technique was chosen because it best offered a method of obtaining consensus from experts regarding phenomena with little or no conclusive evidence and where opinion is essential (Meshkat et al., 2014).

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and rationale for using the Delphi technique to answer the research questions and address the gap in the literature. This chapter also includes a description of the sample population and participant selection strategy and an overview of the data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, a description of the role of the researcher and evaluation methods for trustworthiness, credibility, conformability, and transferability are discussed. Lastly, a description of steps taken to protect human subjects and a chapter summary are discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

A review and comparison of the current literature was conducted, and it was determined that identifying toxic leaders through the lens of the toxic triangle in practice cannot sufficiently be captured using the approach of a quantitative study. No quantitative studies were available to describe organizational strategies for managing and identifying toxic leadership, and inadequate qualitative literature on this subject. Padilla et al. (2007) and Thoroughgood et al. (2016) both posited the need for additional research for clarity on toxic leaders and the toxic triangle. Aligning to this study's purpose and the literature gap, the central research question asks: What is the level of consensus among subject matter experts on effective current strategies organizations practice identifying and managing toxic leaders?

Qualitative research allows a researcher to distinctly understand the phenomenon under study and collect data realistically using interviews, surveys, and questionnaires that ask open-ended questions (Gaus, 2017). Qualitative research aims to generate conclusions not from statistical procedures or quantified via other methodologies. Of the numerous qualitative methodologies, the Delphi study design was chosen because it was the most adequate in developing rich data through consensus among a geographically dispersed panel of experts. The benefit of this approach was the large amount of comprehensive data while maintaining participants' views. The study used and collected empirical instruments that included a literature review and four rounds of questionnaires to capture the data through the lens of individuals.

While designing this study, investigations into other methodologies were evaluated but found inadequate to reach the rich data required. The Delphi method offered several advantages not found in other methods such as case study, ethnography, or phenomenology. Using the case study methodology was inappropriate because it focuses on how a phenomenon affects individuals by using their perspectives as a central tool to explore events. Case study research is interactive, focusing on a participant's lived experience (Crowe et al., 2011). Ethnography was excluded because this study was not focused on the cultural or gender aspects of the phenomenon of toxic leadership. Phenomenology was considered in depth, but I assumed the panel of experts would collectively provide more valuable knowledge through a consensus of methods organizations could use to mitigate organizational toxicity. Various qualitative designs exist, but the one that seemed most appropriate for this investigation was the Delphi technique. Consensus procedures are sometimes used when there is a lack of evidence or when the available evidence conflicts with the specific area of interest. Delphi is unusual in that it may be used in areas where there has been little prior study or where the aggregate subjective opinion of experts can be used to gain an advantage (Avella, 2016). Additionally, using the electronic or e-Delphi technique allowed for recruiting experts not limited to a geographical area (Davidson, 2013).

Role of the Researcher

I performed the role of both facilitator and observer in this e-Delphi study. In Delphi research, the facilitator's responsibility includes the capacity to make fair decisions when selecting expert panel members and having clarity regarding the

questions and comments given to the participants. These roles are crucial in Delphi research and encompass responsibilities such as selecting expert panel members, maintaining transparency in question formulation, and ensuring unbiased analysis of participant responses (Powell, 2003). As the researcher, I did not directly respond to participant queries but instead focused on analyzing responses to shape subsequent survey rounds. My extensive background influenced the choice of expert panel members and the formulation of study questions in management. A crowdsourcing approach was used through the Prolific platform to recruit participants for this study. Crowdsourcing in research has been recognized for its benefits in expanding participant diversity and access to a broader range of perspectives (Brabham, 2008; Estellés-Arolas & González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012).

In qualitative research, a researcher collects data as a human instrument, responsible for recognizing any potential biases and study limitations. My primary role was that of planner/coordinator/recorder, and my communications with panel members remained through Prolific and Qualtrics to limit researcher bias while maintaining anonymity (Avella, 2016). A potential manipulation of the findings is also one of the biases associated with the Delphi technique. Addressing these biases through trustworthiness aids in significantly reducing bias. I needed to ensure no researcher bias due to my background as a certified project management professional with over 15 years of experience in leadership roles. The role of a researcher/facilitator is to be well-versed on the subject of exploration and the Delphi procedures as they apply to a study (Avella, 2016). To address these biases and maintain trustworthiness, transparency in a

researcher's background, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations is crucial (Avella, 2016). This transparency ensures that participants are aware of a researcher's qualifications and background, allowing them to assess potential biases in the study.

I recognized that participants may hesitate to provide candid answers out of fear of backlash. To alleviate this apprehension and reinforce transparency, informed consent was integrated into the Qualtrics platform as the survey's first question. The consent page outlined the study's objectives and methodologies. It emphasized the assurance of strict confidentiality while explicitly stating the absence of any negative consequences for withdrawing from the study at any time. The following step was to create a safe and open environment for participants to share their views without fear of reprisal. Additionally, I required each participant to agree to the informed consent at the start of each round, ensuring participants were aware of their rights and responsibilities throughout the study versus solely at the beginning.

In summary, as the researcher in this e-Delphi study, I played the roles of facilitator and observer, ensuring transparency, addressing potential biases, and fostering an environment conducive to open participant input. Crowdsourcing was employed for participant recruitment, leveraging its benefits in diversifying the participant pool. Transparency and ethical considerations were vital in managing potential researcher biases and ensuring the study's integrity. The informed consent process further safeguarded participant confidentiality and participation without fear of repercussions, aligning with ethical research practices.

Methodology

The Delphi design, developed by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s, gathers expert opinions about a phenomenon using questionnaires and controlled opinion feedback (Linstone & Turoff, 2011). It is a method with judgmental forecasting and a decision-making process that collects expert estimates under a facilitator who supervises these forecasts until group consensus is reached. The distinguishing characteristic of this method is that it includes several rigorous questionnaires paired with controlled feedback as part of its process. Initially, the Delphi method established a precedent for several critical elements of the approach, including using an expert panel that was purposefully chosen to reach an agreement on a specific topic (Fletcher & Marchildon, 2014). The primary goal of this method is to gather educated judgment on issues that are essentially unexplored in a given environment, difficult to describe, and require expertise. The Delphi method's two most important features are unanimous experts and a consensus on the phenomena (Linstone & Turoff, 2011).

The Delphi method is used to gather opinions from specialists based on their experiences when there may be disagreement or a lack of knowledge of the phenomenon (Fletcher & Marchildon, 2014). The incentive for the Delphi method is that several modifications may be made to a Delphi study and an increasingly wide range of applications. Delphi is an iterative method that uses a succession of data gathering and analysis approaches interleaved with feedback to collect and synthesize anonymous expert opinions (Skulmoski et al., 2007). The technique can be helpful when there is a great deal of unknown information regarding a phenomenon; in the case of this specific

study, knowing what works in minimizing organizational toxicity is an excellent example. Additionally, the Delphi method is effective when the goal is to increase understanding of issues, opportunities, and solutions or generate projections of a given problem (Avella, 2016). The e-Delphi, initially coined by MacEachren, accounts for innovation by electronically using the classical Delphi for the widespread organization of experts over the internet (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers agree that using the Delphi technique electronically, or an e-Delphi, allows for more research without physical or geographical limitations (Davidson, 2013).

Qualitative Delphi Research Method

The Delphi method was developed in the 1950s by the RAND Corporation by Norman Dalkey and others to gather a consensus of opinions on a specific topic (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). The Delphi technique systematically gathers expert opinions on a subject until consensus is established (Cole et al., 2013). It is an established qualitative design that can provide a detailed description of a phenomenon by convening a panel of experts to gather opinions to gain consensus through iterative rounds of questioning and controlled feedback (Skulmoski et al., 2007). The Delphi methodology was appropriate because it could provide leaders with rich data responding to calls of action to identify and manage the behaviors of toxic leaders in the workplace to protect the well-being of employees (Murray et al., 2020). Engaging human resources managers, EEOC mediators, project managers, and senior leaders could allow the research to glean pertinent data.

Qualitative research methods, especially the Delphi technique, are appropriate for exploring meaning and gaining consensus when variables are ambiguous or unknown.

According to Sekayi and Kennedy (2017), Delphi is best used for gathering expert opinions when there is limited knowledge about an issue and a researcher wants to improve understanding and prospects for solutions. The Delphi technique was the ideal research design for this study because the topic in question could not be studied using precise analytical techniques. The research question was best addressed by merging the collective expert opinions of a panel to expand the current literature (see Reed, 2004). Using the Delphi technique for this study allowed for the raw data to be turned into final descriptions, themes, and categories through thematic analysis.

One of the advantages of the Delphi approach is that it does not require panelists to be physically present or meet in person, making it possible to conduct research with subject matter experts worldwide. The Delphi technique was best to ensure that the panelists remained confidential and had an equal opportunity to participate honestly without suffering negative consequences. The Delphi method is best described by four key features: anonymity, controlled feedback, iteration, and statistical group response (Sekayi & Kennedy, 2017). Another benefit is that participants are not bound by geography or timing; therefore, the number of participants in Delphi research can be significantly higher (Avella, 2016).

The design I chose for this study was the Delphi method, which included three rounds of questioning to reach a consensus (Avella, 2016). According to Avella (2016), consensus is achieved when the agreement is between 55% and 100%, with a mean of 70%. The Delphi method allows for adjustments, whereas the panel's involvement was conducted electronically via the internet, which included posting on the Prolific platform

and directing participants to Qualtrics for the web-based surveys. Round I used an open-ended survey instrument to define the research problem and elicit detailed qualitative responses from participants. Round II included responses to a Likert-type scale survey developed with the coded respondent feedback from Round I that assessed the suitability of responses (see Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). Round III was a ranking survey based on the supermajority results from the Likert-type scale responses to Round II questions. In Round III, the panel assessed each category using a ranking index based on the level of agreement or disagreement (Skulmoski et al., 2007).

Participant Selection Logic

In conducting a Delphi study on organizational toxicity, participant selection is a critical aspect that necessitates careful consideration and adherence to established criteria. As Barnes and Mattsson (2016) noted, there is no universally prescribed panel size for Delphi investigations; however, it is imperative to establish rigorous criteria to ensure qualified participant selection and avoid erroneous inclusions. The recommended number of participants for most Delphi studies falls within the range of 15 to 20 (Barnes & Mattsson, 2016), underscoring the significance of setting stringent credentials to guide the selection process.

Initially, purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed to target a minimum of 30 participants through social media platforms such as Reddit, LinkedIn, and Facebook. However, attrition issues emerged, with prospective participants encountering difficulties in completing the informed consent or survey, which delayed Round I completion for an extended period. Realizing the limitations of this approach, I

decided to request Walden University Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval (09-13-22-0726590) to transition crowdsourcing via the Prolific platform for participant recruitment. This strategic shift allowed for more efficient and controlled participant acquisition, ensuring a sufficient pool for this study while minimizing potential issues related to attrition or incomplete surveys.

In establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, the study adhered to fundamental research design principles, as noted by Patino and Ferreira (2018). The significance of delineating these criteria lies in their pivotal role in shaping the study's validity and relevance. The inclusion criteria were categorized into the following qualifications: practitioners within public corporations in the United States, including human resources managers, project managers, EEOC mediators, executive leaders, or individuals holding top leadership positions, all of whom possessed a minimum of 5 years of relevant experience in identifying or managing toxic leadership, scholarly experts with a focus on toxic leadership and organizational toxicity, including those who had published interdisciplinary studies or had extensive teaching experience in leadership-related subjects, with a preference for MBA or PhD holders in leadership. Participants who did not meet these specified criteria were not included within the available sample population within the Prolific platform.

The participant panel comprised diverse professionals and academics with expertise in organizational toxicity and toxic leadership. The objective drove the decision to include 30 participants from multiple disciplines to capture a broad spectrum of insights into toxic leadership. The approach aimed to comprehensively examine toxic

leadership, drawing on practitioners' and academics' rich experiences and insights. The data gathered throughout all three rounds further demonstrated the value of Prolific by ensuring a robust and comprehensive exploration of toxic leadership.

I made the methodological decision to engage in a rotational strategy to form the expert panel. Essentially, the population meeting the inclusion criteria was invited to participate in each round of the study, regardless of participation in any other round, allowing for the introduction of fresh perspectives. The choice can be seen as an innovative adaptation of traditional Delphi techniques, where the same panel of experts typically participates throughout all rounds (Hasson et al., 2000). Including new participants at each round allowed for the injection of fresh perspectives and mitigating the effects of groupthink for maintaining the consensus-building process (Skulmoski et al., 2007). All four rounds of questionnaires were administered to 30 participants using the panel rotation.

Instrumentation

Data collection is one of the most important aspects of a credible and successful study, and the instrumentation used is critical (Devers & Frankel, 2000). The instrumentation for this study was the literature review and the three rounds of surveys conducted using Prolific and Qualtrics. A literature review on the Delphi technique was conducted to develop a credible Round I questionnaire. In the study, I adopted the generic Delphi toolkit from Day and Bobeva (2005) as a basis for the four rounds of surveys. The Round I questionnaire was meticulously crafted to address my research questions on toxic leadership and organizational toxicity. The questionnaire incorporated items derived

from peer-reviewed scholarly sources to provide a strong foundation for data collection. Open-ended questions were used to capture expert opinions, facilitating an in-depth exploration of organizational toxicity.

The sources cited in the literature review represent reputable and peer-reviewed academic works (Boddy, 2017; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Thoroughgood et al., 2011). These studies were selected based on their empirical rigor, relevance to the research topic, and contributions to understanding toxic leadership and its consequences. The reputability of these sources lends credibility to the instrument's foundation. These studies were chosen as they represent well-established research in the field and provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

The Round I questionnaire established content validity through the rigorous literature review because it incorporated insights from credible peer-reviewed sources and was sufficiently designed to address my research questions comprehensively. The literature review ensured that the open-ended survey questions in the Round I data collection instrument aligned with the existing knowledge on toxic leadership, workplace bullying, and related organizational toxicity. Round I of the study introduced a set of 10 open-ended questions specifically crafted to elicit comprehensive responses from the panel of experts. Each question was designed to prompt participants to provide at least five examples or instances, ensuring a rich and detailed data set. By soliciting multiple examples from each expert, the study aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, enhancing the findings' robustness and reliability.

Subsequent rounds adopted a quantitative approach, building upon the codes identified in the preliminary round. These rounds employed Likert-type scales, with a 5-point scale to measure the responses. The choice of the scale is supported by Habibi et al. (2014), who noted the commonality of employing 5-point or 7-point Likert scales in research settings, suggesting their effectiveness in capturing the nuances of respondent attitudes and perceptions. The Round III questionnaire required ranking the final list of themes from the codes participants identified in Round II. The fourth and final round required participants to rank their level of agreement to the final list rankings determined in Round III.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Building a Delphi panel includes two steps: (a) defining relevant expertise and (b) identifying individuals with the desired information (Hirschhorn, 2018). The selection of the Delphi panel serves as an integral part of the process, contributing to both the trustworthiness of the results and validity (Skulmoski et al., 2007). According to Linstone and Turoff (2011), the most relevant Delphi panel comprises members of the following three areas: the experts, stakeholders, and facilitators of a given phenomenon. Hsu and Sandford (2007) further found that senior decision-making leaders typically form Delphi panels, authors of journal publications, and those with firsthand experience of the topic.

Not all employees in the workforce have experienced a toxic leader. Therefore, my inclusion criteria needed to be included in Prolific to ensure the sample pool provided applied to this study's requirements. A critical factor in choosing Prolific for research is its high data quality. Peer et al. (2017) comprehensively compared Prolific, MTurk, and

other data collection platforms. The authors found Prolific provided higher quality data, with participants less likely to fail attention checks, indicating more attentive and engaged respondents. This is particularly relevant for studies requiring nuanced understanding and high-quality responses, making this tool advantageous for this study.

This study used crowdsourcing to recruit participants for the Delphi panel. A study by Skulmoski et al. (2007) found that experts on a Delphi panel must meet these four requirements: (a) knowledge and experience with the issues under investigation, (b) capacity and willingness to participate, (c) sufficient time to participate in the Delphi, and (d) effective communication skills. The selection of the participants relied on their unique understanding of the toxic leader and their background and knowledge of remediating and recognizing organizational toxicity. A pivotal advantage of using Prolific lies in its capacity to access a demographically diverse participant pool. Palan and Schitter (2018) praised Prolific for its extensive demographic filtering capabilities, enabling researchers to tailor their recruitment to the study's specific needs.

The study's participant recruitment was conducted via crowdsourcing, using the Prolific pool. The method aligns with the perspectives presented by Saxton et al. (2013), defining crowdsourcing as a model leveraging advanced internet technologies to engage a virtual crowd in specific tasks. The approach is instrumental in accessing various insights and experiences relevant to the study's focus on organizational toxicity. As Flostrand (2017) expounded, crowdsourcing offers an innovative means to gather diverse viewpoints, thereby broadening the participant base beyond a limited circle of experts.

The approach is particularly relevant in Delphi studies, where diverse opinions can enrich the data collected on topics where information is limited.

Crowdsourcing for research studies has been found to offer quite a few benefits. Flostrand (2017) found that the crowd's collective intelligence can be as insightful as the most knowledgeable individual within the crowd. The principle guided the selection of participants with varying experiences in organizational contexts, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the topic. Moreover, Kaivo-oja et al. (2013) contended that decisions made by a knowledgeable crowd are more accurate, underscoring the value of crowdsourced input in Delphi studies. Additionally, it enables gathering diverse opinions and experiences, leading to richer, more nuanced data and enhancing the study's depth and breadth. Moreover, crowdsourcing aligns with the iterative nature of Delphi studies, allowing for continuous refinement of ideas based on collective feedback. Incorporating crowdsourcing into the data collection phase of this Delphi study on organizational toxicity enhanced data collection by ensures that the range of perspectives gathered broad and representative of varied experiences. Crowdsourcing also has the advantage of enhancing the study's validity, as it allows for the aggregation of a wide array of viewpoints, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon of organizational toxicity.

Data saturation in Delphi studies is reached when no new information or themes are observed in the data, indicating that the collective wisdom of the panel has been thoroughly tapped. The literature does not prescribe a fixed number of participants for Delphi studies, as the ideal number is influenced by the study's scope, complexity, and

objectives. However, a panel of experts ranging from 10 to 30 members is generally considered sufficient to ensure a diversity of perspectives while maintaining manageability in data analysis (Hasson et al., 2000). According to Boddy and Croft (2016), the sample size is acceptable if the researcher can explain the quantity in the research context. Additionally, the authors found that, regardless of the size, achieving data saturation and providing an explanation for the saturation are significant criteria in a rigorous and credible study.

Skulmoski et al. (2007) suggested that the number of participants in a Delphi study should be determined based on the need to represent a range of expertise and perspectives relevant to the research question. A greater number of participants can enhance the reliability of the findings, as the merging of opinions from a diverse and large group lends more weight to the consensus reached. It is essential to maintain the balance between enough participants for comprehensive exploration and keeping them manageable for practical analysis and consensus building. The iterative nature of the Delphi method, with three rounds of questioning for this study, also supports reaching saturation as experts refine their responses based on the group feedback, leading to a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of combating organizational toxicity.

I initially used two approaches to identify and recruit participants: advertising the study in the Walden University participant pool, inviting anybody who fulfills the qualifying criteria to participate and participant solicitation posts were posted and reposted within LinkedIn, Facebook, Quora, and Reddit groups for practitioners that meet the qualifying criteria. Admittedly, this recruitment process did not result in finding many

participants, and among those found, some would complete informed consent but not the survey questions, so the plan was abandoned and updated. I requested and received approval from the IRB to crowdsource participants via Prolific. Participants in Prolific could use the link in the platform to go to Qualtrics to complete the questionnaire with the newly IRB-approved informed consent data listed as the first question in each round (Appendix B). The form introduced the researcher, stated the study's goal, and discussed the rounds of questionnaires administered via Qualtrics and the approximate time needed to answer each round of questionnaires. The consent form included eligibility requirements for the study, asked for Prolific IDs, and agreement with participants.

The participant population was selected via crowdsourcing on the Prolific platform, with a target of at least 30 participants. The inclusion criteria outlined earlier became one of the first survey questions for each round. The participants were provided with the opportunity to self-assess their qualifications by indicating their relevance to the specified criteria from the following: (a) human resources managers, project managers, executive leaders, or EEOC investigators of public corporations within the United States; (b) have had at least one experience implementing remediation strategies or managing a toxic leader; (c) served as a subject matter expert or consultant on reducing organizational toxicity; (d) have published interdisciplinary studies in toxic leadership/organizational toxicity or presented on the topic; and (e) educators with experience teaching leadership for at least 5 years.

To facilitate recruitment and data collection, the study protocol was updated and approved by the Walden University IRB to use Prolific for participant acquisition. A

detailed study description, including a link to the informed consent form hosted on Qualtrics, was provided on the Prolific platform. Participants accessed an anonymous link leading to the first round of the survey, which incorporated the informed consent form, ensuring full disclosure of the study's objectives and requirements, confirmation of Prolific IDs, and open-ended questions. A 14-day deadline was established for completing the first round of the survey to enable compensation through the Prolific platform. The responses from the panel were efficiently collected electronically through Qualtrics, maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality crucial for this Delphi study.

The sources of data collection that are used are the first-round questionnaire (Appendix A), the second-round questionnaire (Appendix B), the third-round questionnaire (Appendix C), and the fourth-round questionnaire (Appendix D). The data gained from this study were used to understand the components that make up an effective organizational toxicity remediation strategy. The data were stored per the Walden University IRB's guidelines and destroyed by shredding field materials, deletions of emails, and documentation electronically to protect the participants' privacy. Each round of questioning aided in fine-tuning ideas that should result in group consensus and data saturation. The data for this study were kept safe and confidential, as outlined in the informed consent form. My Qualtrics account was used to keep the data obtained throughout the research project and password-protected Excel files. Additionally, raw data and data analysis files were maintained separate from personal names and identifiers. The study used both primary and secondary data for this qualitative study. Different published documents on toxic leadership and the toxic triangle were reviewed.

The secondary information sources for the study included websites, documents published by different organizations, research papers, journal articles, books, and research reports.

The data collection process in this Delphi study on organizational toxicity was executed through three rounds of iterative questionnaires. The initial segment of the questionnaire on organizational toxicity in each round of this dissertation is pivotal, as it lays the foundation for understanding and addressing the phenomenon. Following the informed consent and request for Prolific IDs to conform to the platform's payment practices was a confirmation of expertise. The next question served as a crucial starting point, gauging the participants' proficiency in discerning the signs and symptoms of organizational toxicity. This step is essential, as recognizing toxicity is the first step towards its betterment, a perspective supported by Lipman-Blumen (2004). Including these questions, as mentioned earlier, in all four rounds allowed me to include a rotational model of participants, whereas anyone fighting inclusion criteria on the Prolific platform could take the survey regardless of participation in prior rounds.

Round I

The Round I questionnaire played a critical role in eliciting strategies to manage, identify, and mitigate the influence of toxic leaders within organizations. It was structured to gain detailed, expert-driven strategies in response to the three research questions in Chapter 1. I recruited 30 participants through Prolific's crowdsourcing platform within one week. Round I questionnaire took an average of 30 minutes for all 30 participants to complete and included open-ended questions to identify the terms surrounding organizational toxicity used to gain consensus in future rounds.

Round II

The development of Round II was designed based on the collective input from Round I of the survey. The subsequent phase involved a selection process where solutions that garnered endorsement from at least 70% of the panel members were carried forward for further evaluation. The threshold aligns with the best practices in Delphi methodologies, ensuring that only the most agreed-upon solutions are progressed for additional scrutiny (Linstone & Turoff, 2011). In Round II, participants were presented with a 5-point Likert-type scale, a widely recognized instrument for gauging opinions in research studies (Likert, 1932). The scales ranged from *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*, while some questions ranged from *not effective*, *slightly effective*, *moderately effective*, *effective*, and *highly effective*. The rating mechanism required participants to assess each solution in terms of both its desirability and feasibility, thereby ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of the proposed strategies.

Round III

Building upon the structured foundation in the first two rounds of this Delphi study, Round III was strategically designed to refine further and validate the findings. This round's goal is to obtain consensus on the strategies to manage, identify, and mitigate the impact of toxic leadership within organizations. Round III involved asking participants to rank the most effective strategies or indicate their level of agreement with the proposed solutions. The round's ranking and agreement scales were influential in quantifying the level of consensus among the panelists to indicate the most favored strategies to address organizational toxicity. Round III also asked the participants to

provide final thoughts or insights. The open-ended component can yield valuable qualitative data, offering a richer understanding of the identified strategies' context and nuances (Hasson et al., 2000).

Round IV

This Delphi study's recruitment procedures for Round IV were designed to maintain continuity and participant engagement from earlier rounds. Recruitment was completed via Prolific, and all 30 participants signed the informed consent before starting the survey. Clear instructions were provided, detailing the specific tasks for Round IV, which included reviewing the rankings generated in Round III and offering their level of agreement and justification for the final decisions. The invitation also included a summary of the findings from the previous rounds to demonstrate how their feedback had shaped the research. Anonymity was reassured to encourage candid responses, and follow-up reminders were sent to those who had not responded. These procedures ensured that participant engagement was sustained throughout the final round, leading to a comprehensive and robust consensus.

Data Analysis Plan

Using the Delphi methodology, data collection and analysis simultaneously occurred for this study (Beiderbeck et al., 2021). A critical component of qualitative research methodology involves organizing and preparing gathered data for comprehensive analysis (Bazen et al., 2021). The initial phase of the Delphi process commenced with the dissemination of an open-ended questionnaire, facilitated via Qualtrics, constructed upon an extensive review of existing literature. The initial

instrument evolved into a more structured questionnaire in successive rounds, reflecting a refinement and convergence of expert opinions. The first stage of the Delphi process allowed panelists to familiarize themselves with the study by contributing data to resolve the phenomenon of the study. In the second round, participants were asked to score items using a Likert-type scale created from the first round of surveys and offer to add any missing terms or additional comments. The third-round questionnaire incorporated the results of the consensus of the previous two rounds, where experts either agreed or disagreed. The third round used the outcomes of the second round's consensus-building based on themes found. The third-round questionnaire used a Likert-type ranking scale for experts to rank organizational toxicity mitigation strategies on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being the most important and five being the least important.

Themes were found using thematic and content analysis, and the themes were used to create survey items for each consecutive round. The technique of examining data to uncover a theme is known as thematic or content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Cruzes et al. (2015) indicated that collecting data might help with cross-case analysis thematically in their study. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a data reduction and analysis technique in which qualitative data is divided, classified, summarized, and rebuilt to capture the significant concepts within the data set. The study used the thematic structure established from the literature review within the conceptual framework as data is gathered and analyzed. Miles and Huberman (1984) outlined procedures for data gathering and analysis simultaneously for effectiveness: (a) coding (organizing data), (b) policing (identifying bias), (c) dictating field notes (instead of only

verbatim recordings), (d) connoisseurship (researcher understanding of phenomenon and context), (e) progressive focusing and funneling (examining data), (f) interim site summaries (narrative reviews of research progress), (g) memoing (formal noting and sharing of emerging issues); and (h) outlining (standardized writing formats).

Upon organizing the collected data, it became imperative to meticulously examine the material to uncover the underlying meanings conveyed by the participants' responses. The analytical process entailed identifying and categorizing responses into distinct themes from the codes, thereby unveiling more precise insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical strategy involved an iterative review of the data between successive Delphi rounds, facilitating the thematic and coded organization of the information. Coding served as a methodological tool to systematically classify the data into coherent groupings, assigning labels that reflected the essence of participants' contributions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The difference between coding approaches is that they are concept-driven and data-driven, otherwise known as open coding (Skjott & Korsgaard, 2019). Thematic analysis undoubtedly involved multiple rounds of descriptive coding to determine a summary for themes. The steps taken for data analysis include conducting each round of questionnaires, analyzing the prior round responses, creating subsequent rounds of questionnaires, completing open coding to group themes based on responses, reducing repeated data, narrowing down long experiences into codes, confirming adequate understanding of experiences, and repeat coding to narrow down the ranking of each via importance.

Coding was employed to distill descriptions into overarching themes to uncover emergent themes within this qualitative study. This process entailed the translation of these themes into narrative text, allowing the findings to naturally surface from the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the coding procedure for this study, the following approach was used to search for patterns: similarity (things happen the same way), difference (they happen in predictably different ways), frequency (they happen often or seldom), sequence (they happen in a particular order), correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events), causation (one appears to cause another). These methods are supported by Braun and Clarke (2006), who outline thematic analysis as a tool for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.

A thorough review of different qualitative data analysis (QDA) software packages was completed in this study and analyzed to compare to manual hand coding. The ability to automatically turn numerous data sources into usable data using codes, themes, and categories is one of the many advantages of using QDA. QDA software employs a variety of approaches for efficiently and effectively systematizing, organizing, and analyzing non-numeric qualitative data. Researchers can use QDA to code data, arrange it into manageable segments, categorize and identify those segments, and organize it in useful ways for research analysis.

The study used NVivo 10 QDA software for data analysis. NVivo 10 's interface and functions are both intuitive, and the visualization tools may be tailored to the demands of this project. It also offers a variety of uses for memos and picture analysis. By having a detailed view window for examining data sources and needing to move the

windows around to examine other elements, QDA can make data visibility easier to use. NVivo 10 was used to analyze all aspects of data sources, the materials were coded, and the preliminary meaning was generated from the questionnaire's notes and participant artifacts. Thematic analysis is used in many research fields, but the steps are typically the same. This study used NVivo 10 in the following order to perform thematic analysis: (a) group the responses to each question, (b) find and catalog themes to make sense of the data, (c) see the connections between themes and move toward analytical insight, (d) assign preliminary codes to describe the content, (e) search for patterns or themes in codes across the different interviews, (f) review themes, (g) define and name themes, (h) make comparisons between participants, and (i) produce the report (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). For subsequent rounds, some descriptive statistics were employed to narrow down the responses and determine consensus.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The researcher was the tool in this qualitative research study. To ensure the research's trustworthiness, it was necessary to demonstrate credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. Trustworthiness refers to how valid, credible, and reliable a study's data collection and analysis are and how ethically the research was conducted (Kornbluh, 2015). The greater validity, credibility, and reliability of the study directly contribute to its trustworthiness, allowing more researchers to use the findings as a basis for their studies (Cope, 2014). To develop an understanding of the commonalities or consensus that develops from the panel to rid organizations of toxicity, this study identified where similar patterned responses arise.

Credibility

The criteria for exceptional qualitative research include worthy topic, rigor, transferability, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical nature, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). Credibility refers to ensuring that the results of qualitative research are believable and capture participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher maintained quality control to ensure the accuracy of study participants' responses by protecting all data collected. To enhance the findings of this study, the researcher incorporated techniques including building trust with participants for truthful data and reducing researcher bias through bracketing and triangulation. The researcher kept a journal that details the thoughts, biases, and participants' reactions during data collection. The objective drove the decision to include 30 participants from multiple disciplines to capture a broad spectrum of insights into toxic leadership. The approach ensured that the study encompasses a wide range of experiences and theoretical perspectives, thereby enhancing the relevance of the findings.

Transferability

The degree to which the study can be transmitted or replicated is referred to as transferability (Schloemer & Schröder-Bäck, 2018). The study topic affected the transferability approach, and the conclusions might serve as best practices for any business. Organizations examining their toxicity may be able to use the processes in this study. The study methodology could be transferred to another industry or country as the process can be duplicated. Transferability also entails a detailed description of the study procedures and settings, from data collection to analysis. The researcher provided a

detailed account of the research environment, background, methods, and methodology in this paper. The use of purposeful sampling for this study allows for duplication of this study because robust data was provided from the panel. The sampling methodology provided rich data from participants who have experienced toxic leadership or studied it, providing a measure of the transferability of the research findings (Hadi et al., 2014).

Dependability

The concept of dependability in qualitative research emphasizes the ability to replicate findings, reflecting the study's consistency over time. Morse et al. (2002) discuss how dependability can be assured through a comprehensive methodological description that allows for replication. To enhance dependability in this study, the documented steps included employing a rigorous thematic analysis for coding and theme generation from questionnaire responses, questions, and notes, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Using an audit trail, which is the researcher's record of keeping methods and ideas in detail throughout the research process, can help to enhance dependability in research (Baillie, 2015). The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document my reflections and thoughts during data collection.

Confirmability

Confirmability aids in dealing with preconceived assumptions and ideas about the study so that the participant's perspective and experience may be effectively provided (Chenail, 2011). The capacity of researchers to stay objective and unbiased while studying the link between data and findings is referred to as confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). A comparison of participant replies is included in the data analysis to establish the

confirmability of the data gathered. To improve my understanding of confirmability, I continually looked for and eliminated any biases that could affect the participants' replies. To maintain the study's integrity and validity, all papers, policies, and data findings were stored online with password security and backed up to OneDrive.

Ethical Procedures

During qualitative investigation, a qualitative researcher can encounter numerous ethical issues during data collection, analysis, and distribution of qualitative reports that require a reflexive approach to ethics throughout the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The qualitative research project required approval from Walden University's IRB because data was collected from human participants sharing their experiences with the phenomenon of toxic leadership. Emanuel et al. (2000) argued that the function of an IRB is crucial as it comprises a panel of experts dedicated to protecting participants from physical or psychological harm, ensuring that all research protocols meet established ethical standards. Walden University's IRB approval process ensured that participants were protected from harm and would receive full disclosure of the study's objective, which was approved under #09-13-22-0726590. All participants in this study were voluntary, per Walden's ethical standards. The study included an in-depth depiction of participants' thoughts and experiences in mitigating organizational toxicity. All data collected from participants was considered strictly confidential and stored in a secured location to protect their privacy.

Summary

The chapter highlighted the chosen qualitative research approach and provided reasoning for the Delphi technique, which was the methodology chosen. Specifically, it highlights how providing reasoning for leadership style and behavior choices required this approach and how other qualitative and quantitative methodologies failed to meet this need (Bryman, 2004). The benefit of qualitative techniques is that they produce rich, comprehensive data while maintaining the participants' views and providing different settings for comprehending the topic under investigation. Also discussed was that other research approaches in the same or similar areas might be needed to substantiate this study's findings and design. The study used crowdsourcing sampling with set criteria to ensure that the most relevant participants were selected for this expert panel for the study.

The chapter included the methods for data collection for all four rounds and the qualitative Delphi methodology undertaken for this study. The Delphi panel selection criteria processes, use of Prolific crowdsourcing, and rotating panel guidelines were discussed in detail. A detailed explanation of how each round of questionnaires was designed and how they were administered was also discussed. In Chapter 4, I present the study's findings for each round through a detailed explanation.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on effectively identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity. As described in Chapter 3, this study's Delphi design involved completing all questionnaire rounds online via Qualtrics. The panel of experts was recruited via Prolific, a crowdsourcing site. The population from this study included leaders working within U.S. companies or experts in leadership research or education. Presented in Chapter 4 is the data analysis of each of the three rounds used in this e-Delphi study. Included are the analyses of the mitigation aspects and leadership traits revealed in the first round that can serve as the foundation for reaching a consensus in Rounds II or III. The chapter will conclude with the data analyzed from the first round of the survey, how it generated questions for subsequent round questionnaires, and finally, the data from the second and third rounds. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are effective strategies for managing toxic leaders?

RQ2: What are effective strategies to identify toxic leaders?

RQ3: What are effective strategies to mitigate organizational toxicity?

Research Setting

The section provides an overview of the research environment for the current study, with a specific emphasis on the panel of specialists who took part in the Delphi survey. The study focused on reducing organizational toxicity and needed participants

with expertise in toxic leadership dynamics based on specific criteria. The e-Delphi study design was used to direct participants recruited through the Prolific crowdsourcing platform to Qualtrics, a survey administration platform. For each successive round of the Delphi study, participants were directed to the Qualtrics platform to ensure the study followed consistent methods and allowed for thorough data collection. The data collection process ensured the protection of anonymity by exclusively identifying each participant using their randomly generated Prolific ID. These experts were selected based on the inclusion criteria outlined in Chapter 3. These criteria enabled the selection of a broad and competent group capable of offering essential insights into the intricate dynamics of toxic leadership and organizational toxicity, which confirmed methodological continuity and facilitated comprehensive data collection.

Demographics

These experts were selected based on the inclusion criteria mentioned in Chapter 3. The criteria were to ensure a diverse and knowledgeable group that can provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of toxic leadership and organizational toxicity. The criteria for expert selection encompassed a range of qualifications, experiences, and roles, all of which contribute to the richness of their opinions. Each expert's background was requested as a multiple-choice question based on the entrance criteria in each study round. The criterion established their expertise and familiarity with the subject matter.

- Doctoral-level qualification: Experts hold a PhD in disciplines such as leadership, psychology, organizational psychology, or industrial psychology. This academic

background guarantees a comprehensive understanding of psychological and organizational dynamics.

- Conflict resolution experience: Participants possess experience in developing conflict resolution practices. This experience equips them with practical knowledge that can influence their opinions on the study's topic.
- Educational background: The expert group comprises professors who teach subjects in psychology, organizational psychology, industrial psychology, leadership, or organizational change. Their role as educators ensures a deep understanding of theoretical and practical aspects of the field.
- Diverse professional roles: The participants encompass various professional roles, including human resources managers, project managers, executive leaders, organizational psychologists, industrial psychologists, and EEOC investigators. This diversity enriches the study by incorporating perspectives from different organizational functions.
- Corporate affiliation: All experts work for corporations within the United States, providing insights into the context of organizational toxicity within the country's organizational landscape.
- Conflict resolution experience: The experts possess direct experience in resolving workplace conflicts. This firsthand experience shaped their understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in addressing toxic workplace dynamics.

- Best practices implementation: The expert group has actively worked to apply best practices for resolving the effects of organizational toxicity. This practical experience enhances the credibility of their opinions and recommendations.

The experts' diverse academic qualifications and extensive expertise greatly influenced the outcomes of this Delphi study. Their solid educational background ensured a well-informed perspective. At the same time, their active participation in conflict resolution and team leadership provided a nuanced comprehension of the challenges and potential solutions related to toxic leadership and organizational toxicity. In addition, their affiliations with various companies and industries in the United States resulted in unique perspectives specific to the context. A comprehensive examination of the occurrences of toxic leadership and its impact on organizational toxicity was conducted by including experts from many fields in the expert panel. Integrating scholarly knowledge with hands-on experience guarantees that the collected recommendations hold substantial significance.

The Round I panel was a heterogeneous group of individuals, predominantly composed of professionals and leaders from many fields. The presence of many perspectives and backgrounds is essential in thoroughly examining toxic leadership. The bar chart (Figure 2) illustrates the distribution of the panelists' backgrounds, highlighting the preponderance of human resources experts, project managers, and senior executives.

Figure 2*Round I Panelists Profile*

Round II saw a similar makeup of participants contributing their expertise. The demographic composition of this round's panel included a notable representation of individuals with extensive experience in implementing strategies for managing toxicity in organizational settings. As illustrated in the bar chart (Figure 3), most participants in this round were experienced managers and leaders, complemented by a subset of educators and subject matter experts.

Figure 3*Round II Panelists Profile*

In Round III, the panel composition displayed a diverse blend of academic and practical expertise. The round's demographic profile, detailed in the bar chart (Figure 4), also revealed a significant presence of experienced managers and leaders with experience with toxic leadership.

Figure 4*Round III Panelists Profile*

In Round IV, the panel composition displayed a diverse blend of academic and practical expertise. The round's demographic profile, detailed in the bar chart (Figure 5), also revealed a significant presence of participants who were experienced managers and leaders who had experience with toxic leadership.

Figure 5*Round IV Panelists Profile***Data Collection**

The data collection mechanism combined Prolific and Qualtrics, collectively ensuring methodological consistency and participant engagement. Participants were recruited via the Prolific crowdsourcing platform and then directed to Qualtrics for each successive survey round. Using Prolific to direct participants to Qualtrics preserved the integrity of the study's methodology because it allowed participants to engage with the evolving research from any geographic location. It was not until the end of each round's data collection period that all participants' responses were analyzed to create the questions for the next round. The process allowed for refining suggested strategies over subsequent rounds based on collective feedback and emerging consensus (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The Prolific platform is a robust crowdsourcing tool known for

attracting participants possessing specialized expertise, in this case, toxic leadership and organizational dynamics. The method guaranteed the inclusion of individuals who fulfilled precise criteria that were in line with the aims of our study. Upon acceptance of the informed consent, participants were provided a link to the Qualtrics for each round, providing a seamless transition and consistent user experience across data collection rounds.

The data collection period was between April 2023 and June 2024, and four rounds of questionnaires were completed. The period included the initial phase of recruitment, which was modified after facing initial difficulties, and the shift to the Prolific platform after receiving approval from the Walden University IRB. Before each round, participants were required to give their informed consent. Additionally, a new invite was sent for each round questionnaire, inviting new experts to join, regardless of their participation in prior rounds. Modifying recruitment for each round guaranteed the inclusion of diverse and up-to-date viewpoints and limited participant burnout.

During the initial research phase, I used a qualitative approach in Round I by administering an open-ended questionnaire to collect diverse techniques for dealing with organizational toxicity. By using an exploratory approach, I was able to derive a diverse array of viable solutions from the panel during the open-ended questions. During Round II, the panel evaluated the practicality of these approaches using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, a widely used technique for measuring views and attitudes (Likert, 1932). During Round III, the findings from Round II were further analyzed by instructing the expert panel to assess the strategies and determine their effectiveness using a ranking

system from highest to lowest (Likert, 1932). In the final round, the study leveraged the results from prior rounds. It tasked the expert panel with prioritizing these strategies, ranking them from the most effective to the least effective.

Round I

In this study, the Round I questionnaire was critical in elucidating strategies to manage, identify, and mitigate the influence of toxic leaders within organizations. The survey was methodically crafted to encourage experts to provide rich data regarding effective strategies in response to the three research questions. The Round I recruitment in Prolific resulted in 30 completed surveys in total. The responses received provided a great foundation of data, forming subsequent rounds of analysis and furnishing a rich pool of data for comprehensive exploration and interpretation. At the time of the closing of Round I, 13 surveys were incomplete. The 13 represented the questionnaires started by prolific members, but they opted not to consent and closed the survey. Lastly, one survey was submitted in a foreign language and had to be excluded from the analysis due to linguistic constraints and the fact that it did not meet the inclusion criteria.

The study's data collection was exclusively virtual using the Prolific and Qualtrics platform, allowing participants to engage in the survey from diverse geographic locations across the United States. Round I data collection occurred over 4 weeks. The first week of data collection included recruiting participants willing to sign the informed consent and 3 weeks to complete the questionnaire. Chapter 3 outlined the changes made during data collection and recruitment and was approved by the Walden University IRB. The adjustments primarily pertained to the unexpected challenges encountered during

participant recruitment and survey administration via LinkedIn, Reddit, and Facebook, necessitating modifying recruitment strategies to crowdsourcing.

The Round I questionnaire was designed to generate in-depth insights on managing, identifying, and mitigating the effects of toxic leaders through open-ended questions. Despite my intentions for thorough engagement via social media, I encountered several challenges. Initially, only nine participants from social media recruitment signed the informed consent. Out of the nine responses, five surveys were completed in languages other than English and were therefore excluded from the analysis for not meeting inclusion criteria; three participants started but did not complete the survey, and the remaining two did not initiate the survey. The incomplete surveys did illustrate the time commitment and depth of questions (10) asked during the Round I questionnaire. Switching the recruitment strategy to Prolific crowdsourcing after these initial setbacks proved to be a turning point. Despite these challenges, the robustness of the data collected and the adaptive recruitment strategies employed aided the generation of meaningful insights into managing toxic leadership and organizational toxicity.

There were 30 surveys completed during Round I by crowdsourcing the participant panel in Prolific. The survey ran for approximately 4 weeks and closed upon the 30th participant completing their survey. This round aimed to generate an extensive list of factors satisfying the identification and management of toxic leaders and the remediation of organizational toxicity. There were 10 open-ended questions in Round I: a question for informed consent, a question ranking their expertise, and a question to

identify Prolific IDs. A total of 1,127 responses were received from the panel for all 10 questions. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants' responses to each question.

Table 1

Round I Total Responses

Question	Participant responses
1	154
2	142
3	107
4	99
5	105
6	88
7	136
8	123
9	93
10	80

The Round I questionnaire featured open-ended questions, inviting participants to provide expert inputs that served as the foundation for creating the first set of codes. Participants were encouraged to express their perspectives, experiences, and insights regarding strategies to address toxic leadership and organizational toxicity. Their responses provided a wealth of information, crucial for developing the initial set of themes for analysis. These open-ended responses were systematically analyzed, facilitating the identification of crucial patterns essential for subsequent rounds of analysis and consensus building.

Round II

Round II adheres to the principles of the Delphi method with iterative refinement, as evident in the questions developed in Round II. The round was developed based on the expert panel's collective feedback obtained during Round I. Through descriptive analysis

of the Round I data, only variables that scored a median of at least 4 and had an interquartile range (IQR) of 1 were chosen to be included in the Round II questionnaire because they showed significant importance. In addition, participants were given the chance to offer other criteria that were not included in the list. Magilvy and Thomas (2009) highlighted this aspect as a basis of the Delphi technique, wherein the analysis informs each subsequent round of the responses from the prior round. The approach served a dual purpose: to interpret and clarify the findings that emerged earlier and to gain further insight into the dynamics of organizational toxicity.

After developing the Round II questionnaire, a rigorous review and approval process through the Walden University IRB confirmed this study's adherence to ethical research standards. A notable aspect of this round was that participation was not exclusively limited to those who had completed Round I. Instead, all pertinent data from the first round was made accessible to participants in Round II, thereby enabling both returning and new participants to contribute informed responses. Round II survey participants were recruited through Prolific and directed to the survey in Qualtrics. The 30 experts composing the panel, regardless of their participation in Round I, were crucial in enriching the study with their specialized knowledge and perspectives. The 4-week timeframe gave participants enough time to review the questions and provide responses denoting their expertise while adequately compensating them for their time.

In Round II, participants were asked questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale, the widely recognized instrument for gauging opinions in research studies (Likert, 1932). The scale ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, and in some questions, it

ranged from *not effective* to *highly effective*. The rating mechanism required participants to assess each solution in terms of both its desirability and feasibility, thereby ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of the proposed strategies. The dual-focused approach is critical in Delphi studies, as it facilitates a balanced consideration of the suggested solutions' practicality and preference (Hasson et al., 2000).

Round III

The Round III questionnaire was constructed using the findings from Round II while adhering to the iterative methodology employed in this study. After creating the Round III questionnaire, Walden University's IRB conducted a comprehensive review to verify compliance with ethical research standards before recruiting participants. For this round of the Delphi research, I applied a methodological technique that diverged from conventional Delphi approaches. Instead of employing a consistent panel of experts for all rounds, I presented a fresh group of participants. The methodology, influenced by Okoli and Pawlowski's (2004) examination of the versatility and adaptation of the Delphi method in different research settings, facilitated the incorporation of new viewpoints and enhanced the dataset with a broader range of insights.

Due to the rotating panel, participants were required to sign the informed consent before accessing the questionnaire for each round of this Delphi study. Ensuring the ethical rigor of this study was a top priority, beginning with securing informed consent to guarantee participants' awareness of the study and voluntary participation. Participants had to choose from a list of criteria closely resembling their expertise. The inclusion criteria validated participants' knowledge and experience with the study's focus on

leadership and organizational toxicity. Participants were then presented with a list of techniques and asked to rank them, assigning one from the highest to lowest (varied per question).

Round IV

The study's fourth and final round was constructed by using the findings from Round III, continuing with the iterative methodology. After creating the Round IV questionnaire, Walden University's IRB conducted a comprehensive review to verify compliance with ethical research standards before recruiting participants. As with Round III, I used a rotating participant pool that allowed new participants to join the panel regardless of involvement with previous rounds. The Round IV questionnaire required signing the informed consent for the round and confirming their expertise with the inclusion criteria before starting the questions. The panel was provided with the rankings of the strategies as determined by participants in Round III. The panel was asked to review the rankings of these strategies, provide their level of agreement from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* with the current rankings, and explain the reasoning behind their choices. A total of 34 surveys were started; however, this breaks down into 30 surveys completed, with one partially completed, two not completed, and one started but remains incomplete.

Data Analysis

In this section, I outline the analytical approach adopted to examine the rich data collected from the four rounds of this Delphi study. A specific focus was dedicated to the nuanced strategies experts proposed to combat organizational toxicity. The analysis was

based on the methodical examination of participant responses, facilitated by using NVivo 10 software, Microsoft Excel, and IBM SPSS (Version 28.0), which enabled the data's organization, coding, and thematic analysis. The technique played an instrumental role in distilling the diverse expert insights into coherent themes and patterns, informing the iterative refinement of questions for subsequent rounds. Round I consisted of open-ended questions and elucidated responses that provided an extensive dataset from where key themes could be identified, setting the stage for a more focused inquiry in the later rounds.

Round I

The analysis of the questionnaire results in Round I entailed a careful and systematic procedure, starting with coded units and progressing to more general thematic representations. The data obtained from participants' replies to the questions provided valuable insights into different elements of organizational toxicity through the three research questions. In the initial coding phase, replies were analyzed line-by-line to discover essential phrases or keywords. The meticulous and systematic technique allowed the identification of distinct codes that accurately represented the individual notions or ideas provided by the panel. I also paid special attention to repeated entries, including synonymous replies and various statistical criteria, to thoroughly interpret the Round I results (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The primary objective of the initial data-collecting phase was to create an exhaustive inventory of possibly crucial aspects pertinent to the recognition, handling, and reduction of toxic leaders, as well as the mitigation of organizational toxicity. The

initial step involved reviewing all redundant replies to identify the frequently used responses by the panel. Each of the research questions generated comparable answers that may be used to promote favorable outcomes for companies. A total of 1,162 participant responses were received from the 10 open-ended questions in Round I. After cleaning the data of duplicates and discrepant cases, the total was 562. Table 2 presents a comprehensive analysis of all replies, including the original and the responses cleaned and organized by question.

Table 2

Round I Total Participant Responses

Question	Participant responses	Cleaned responses
1	154	116
2	142	79
3	107	59
4	99	38
5	105	45
6	88	36
7	136	43
8	123	45
9	93	59
10	80	42

The initial analysis involved reviewing terms and concepts that were closely related but not identically expressed by the experts. Additionally, tools for qualitative analysis were used to create word clouds and employ other techniques for examining the open-ended responses collected from the expert panel. During this process, it was determined that responses to Questions 9 and 10 should be consolidated, as they were essentially identical questions. The decision was supported by observations that many participants indicated that Question 10 had been addressed in their response to Question

9, while others replicated their answers. The open-ended responses to the Round I questionnaire were imported into NVivo 10, a specialized software tool used to enhance the coding and thematic analysis process. Upon reviewing the data, three categories have emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) Category 1: Identifying toxic leaders, includes the behaviors, traits, signs to look out for, and who can aid in identifying toxic leaders; (b) Category 2: Managing toxic leaders; and (c) Category 3: Mitigating organizational toxicity.

Several key codes emerged from the analysis when examining the patterns in the data. Figure 6 provides a word cloud generated for the most common responses received to the question: What are the keywords or phrases that describe the toxic leader? Further examination of the data revealed recurring themes. For instance, responses to Question 1, which solicited “keywords or phrases that describe toxic leaders,” predominantly included descriptors such as “abuses power” and “arrogant.” These terms suggest a perception of toxic leaders as individuals who exert control excessively and exhibit overconfidence to the detriment of team cohesion and morale. In addition, the analysis of responses to Question 6, which asked about the “plan to prevent hiring toxic leaders,” highlighted preventive strategies favored by the experts. Codes such as “vetting with references” and “background checks” were frequently mentioned, pointing to the reliance on thorough background screenings and reference checks as critical tools for filtering potential hires and ensuring they are well-suited for leadership roles without toxic tendencies. Responses also yielded codes like “training on ethical leadership” and “establishing a clear code of conduct,” suggesting that participants see substantial value

among panelists. The mean, mode, median, and standard deviation of their scores were calculated to validate the level of agreement among participants for each descriptor, consistent with the conventional Delphi methodology (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). A nuanced approach was adopted to analyze the responses garnered through a 5-point Likert scale, with the scale endpoints defined as 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. This phase was pivotal in distilling the collective wisdom of the expert panel to identify consensus areas that merited further exploration in the subsequent round. The analytical strategy was designed to sift through the data for items that achieved a high median score, indicative of general agreement, and exhibited a low IQR, signaling a tight consensus among the participants.

The selection of a median score threshold of 4 or higher as a threshold was instrumental in ensuring that only those items that resonated strongly with the majority of the participants were advanced to the next round. The rationale was that a median score of 4 or 5 unequivocally demonstrated that a significant proportion of the panel viewed the statements favorably, thereby underscoring their relevance and perceived importance within organizational toxicity. Additionally, the IQR was used to gauge the consensus among the panelists' responses. An IQR threshold of 1 or below was set to identify items where the middle 50% of responses were closely aligned, thus reflecting a narrower spread of opinions around the median and, by extension, a more substantial consensus. The dual-faceted approach, leveraging both the median and IQR, allowed for a balanced inclusion of items that were not only broadly supported but also aligned closely with the collective viewpoint of the expert panel, adhering to the core principles of the Delphi

design. For example, in response to behaviors and characteristics of toxic leaders, there were 116 participants' responses, resulting in 49 meeting this study's threshold see Figure 7 for the top 15 traits.

Figure 7

Top 15 Toxic Leader Traits

Responses	N	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	1st Quartile	3rd Quartile	IQR	Mode
Q4_1 abuses power	30	1	5	4.47	5.00	1.042	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_6 Arrogant	30	1	5	4.27	5.00	1.015	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_10 bully	30	1	5	4.27	5.00	1.112	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_11 can't admit wrong	30	1	5	4.33	5.00	0.994	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_46 Highly self interested	30	2	5	4.37	5.00	0.89	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_98 someone who believes he has power over others and abuses it	30	1	5	4.30	5.00	1.022	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_104 toxic	30	2	5	4.63	5.00	0.718	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_7 Authoritarian	30	2	5	4.37	4.50	0.765	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_22 controlling	30	2	5	4.23	4.50	0.935	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_35 Egotistical	30	2	5	4.30	4.50	0.837	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_79 not showing empathy	30	2	5	4.30	4.50	0.837	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_89 power-hungry	30	2	5	4.33	4.50	0.844	4.00	5.00	1.00	5.00
Q4_36 Emotional volatility	30	1	5	4.20	4.50	0.997	3.75	5.00	1.25	5.00
Q4_38 Exhibits priority on hierarchy rather than being part of the solution	30	1	5	4.13	4.50	1.106	3.75	5.00	1.25	5.00
Q4_42 Gaslighting	30	1	5	4.10	4.50	1.185	3.75	5.00	1.25	5.00

Round III

The third round of the study gave critical insights into the most effective strategies by the panel of experts. Using a ranking scale, participants evaluated various traits and behaviors indicative of toxic leadership and organizational strategies to address

this issue. According to the collected data, the highest-rated strategies signaled a clear consensus on the leading indicators of toxic leadership and the most impactful interventions required to mitigate their effects within organizations. Using NVivo 10 software and Microsoft Excel, I categorized participant responses, allowing the emergence of distinct thematic patterns indicative of consensus among experts (Allsop et al., 2022). The coding process transitioned inductively from specific behavioral traits to broader organizational strategies, culminating in creating themes such as leadership accountability, ethical cultivation, and proactive intervention.

Round III, the data analysis process was multifaceted. Quantitative data from the Likert-scale ratings provided in Round II were reexamined to gauge the level of consensus on each proposed strategy's desirability and feasibility. Meanwhile, qualitative feedback offered by participants was scrutinized for additional insights and implications for practice. Analysis of the Likert-scale responses revealed a robust alignment of panelist opinions, particularly on strategies emphasizing open communication channels and transparent policy enforcement as crucial to mitigating toxic leadership. These findings reflect the contemporary leadership discourse, posing that ethical leadership and accountability are foundational to positive organizational change (Brown et al., 2005).

The thematic analysis of Round III data illuminated a path forward for organizations seeking to identify, manage, and mitigate toxic leadership. The identified themes and strategies, now substantiated by expert consensus, provide a foundation to build upon to foster ethical leadership and positive organizational culture. The final synthesis offers actionable insights that have been vetted through rigorous scholarly

methodology and hold the potential to guide organizational policy and leadership development programs.

Round IV

In the fourth and final round of this study, participants were asked to rate to what degree they agreed or disagreed with the solutions ranking of the results of the Round III questionnaire. The responses were downloaded from Qualtrics, which provided a detailed breakdown of the panel's agreement or disagreement with the findings from Round III. The analysis generated a percentage summary of responses, enabling the identification of solutions that achieved a 70% consensus on agreement or disagreement. Figure 8 is a sampling of participant responses to Question 4 on the questionnaire. The comments provided insights into the panel's thinking based on their expertise. The last participant's response was insightful and suggested that not all behaviors typically associated with toxic leadership result from inherent toxicity. The rationale indicates that various factors and personal reasons may influence a person's behavior, which may be mistaken for toxic leadership traits. NVivo 10 was again used to identify recurring themes for further analysis of the open-ended responses in Round 4. I explored and described the causal relationships among the identified themes in the open-ended responses through data coding and thematic analysis.

Figure 8

Round IV Survey Rationale

Participant ID	Please indicate below to what degree you agree or disagree with the solutions ranking	Please specify why:
65c14cbb9ede56944d5a10cf	Strongly agree	While toxic leaders are not going to display every single characteristic, they will display several. In my two prior experiences managing toxic leaders, they each displayed a combination of these characteristics. I have also had experience working for a toxic leader and they displayed these characteristics as well, particularly the manipulation and abuse of power/control.
666ed2f6d2a4f80380818366	Agree	These are all characteristics of toxic leaders. The irony is that they are not really leaders when they exhibit such negative behaviors. They often try to squash any hint of negative talk about the toxic leader. Employees often live in fear without knowing what will happen next. Rapid mood swings and unpredictable behavior rule a toxic leadership's life.
664292449aae70aee489cba8	Agree	I would rank dishonesty and manipulation much higher
65f7c51fd027b2aa374be148	Disagree	People may not necessarily behave this way due to toxicity. Some people have several reasons and factors that lead them to behave a certain way.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The rigor of qualitative inquiry is reinforced by its trustworthiness, and this multifaceted concept serves as the foundation of a study's integrity and applicability. The section describes the stringent measures to bolster the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The four cornerstones laid down by Lincoln and Guba constitute the foundation of qualitative research's trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Using triangulation, participant validation, and an audit trail, this research aspires to present credible findings that can withstand the scrutiny of practical applicability across varied organizational landscapes (Tracy, 2010). A systematic approach to data triangulation not only corroborates the findings but also ensures that the conclusions drawn reflect the participants' realities, uncolored by the researcher's subjectivity (Jirwe, 2011). These strategies demonstrate a dedication to maintaining high research standards, ensuring that

the findings on toxic leadership and organizational toxicity accurately reflect real-world corporate experiences

Credibility

The credibility of this study is paramount, particularly given the qualitative nature of the research and the phenomenon of organizational toxicity. The study's credibility involved demonstrating that the study accurately represents the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding toxic leadership in organizations. I focused on accurately capturing and representing the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding toxic leadership. Triangulation and member checking were central to this process. By cross-verifying data from various expert responses and employing different methodologies, I aimed to comprehensively understand toxic leadership, drawing on the approach suggested by Carter et al. (2014). Further enhancing credibility, I engaged in member checking by sharing a summary of initial findings with participants for their validation, a step underscored by Birt et al. (2016) for its importance in affirming the accuracy of data interpretation.

Transferability

The transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or groups. In this study, organizational transferability was keenly considered. Methods I employed to meet transferability criteria included providing detailed descriptions to the expert participant panel. To enhance transferability, a rich, detailed description of the research context, process, and findings was provided iteratively to participants throughout rounds. Such detailed accounts

included comprehensive details about the participant selection, data collection methods, and the nature of the organizational settings being studied (Shenton, 2004). Such detailed descriptions should allow other researchers to assess the applicability of the findings from their perspectives. Based on the inclusion criteria, this study involved diverse participants from different organizational and educational backgrounds. The diversity enhances the potential applicability of the findings across various organizational types and cultures.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to data stability over time and conditions. I employed the following strategies to strengthen dependability in this study: an audit trail, coding, and recoding. The audit trail was maintained, documenting the research process in detail. Records of data collection and analysis decisions were kept meticulously, allowing other researchers to review and critique the study's process. Throughout each round of questionnaires, the data was coded and recoded at different times to ensure the thoroughness of the patterns found. The time-phased strategy aided in assessing the consistency of the coding process. The process also ensured that the categorization and theme development were stable and reflected the data. Using NVivo 10 to maintain data and methodologically implement coding also strengthened the dependability of this study.

Prior to initiating each round of this Delphi study questionnaire, participants were mandated to identify their area of expertise from a list of predefined inclusion criteria. An inclusion criteria was instituted to guarantee that all participants brought the necessary depth of knowledge and experience pertinent to the study's exploration of leadership

dynamics and organizational toxicity. The alignment ensured that the data originated from respondents deeply involved with the particulars of leadership and organizational behavior, enhancing the dependability of the data. By doing so, the study maintained a high standard for participant contributions, guaranteeing that the drawn conclusions were based on expert consensus, making them more substantial and actionable.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research concerns research findings specific to the participants, not researcher bias, motivation, or interest. I was able to employ measures to strengthen confirmability. To enhance confirmability, this study implemented several measures to ensure that the findings are rooted in participant responses rather than influenced by my biases or predispositions. A key strategy was data triangulation, which involved cross-validating findings across diverse data types and sources. The approach fortified the study's findings by providing a multi-faceted view of the data. It minimized the potential for bias, allowing for the corroboration of data points from different angles. Moreover, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data provided a robust framework for analysis, lending confidence to the study's conclusions.

Additionally, I maintained a reflexivity journal throughout the research process, which served as a critical tool for self-reflection and transparency. In this journal, I documented my thoughts, biases, and the evolution of my understanding of the study's themes, which helped mitigate the influence of personal biases on the study's findings. Self-reflection is crucial in qualitative research, as it ensures that the researcher remains aware of their influence on the research process and outcomes. Self-reflection helped

verify the data's accuracy and reduced the risk of researcher bias influencing the outcomes (Tracy, 2010). The journal also provided a transparent record of the research journey, offering insights into decision-making processes and the rationale behind methodological choices, further contributing to the study's confirmability.

Study Results

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on effectively identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity. In this section, I present the findings of my study into the effects of toxic leadership within organizations, focusing on how these leaders influence organizational culture and employee well-being. The analysis here is structured around the comprehensive data collected through the Delphi method, involving several surveys with a panel of leadership and organizational behavior experts. The methodology enabled a deep dive into expert opinions and provided a structured way to consolidate consensus on the characteristics and consequences of toxic leadership.

In uncovering the strategies to resolve the complexities of toxic leadership, this study provided a dynamic examination through expert opinions and thematic analysis. The participant insights explored responses to the central research questions, shedding light on the multifaceted strategies to manage, identify, and alleviate organizational toxicity. This section discusses the robust consensus achieved and the valuable dissenting perspectives that challenge and enrich the understanding of toxic leadership. The results of this qualitative Delphi study provide comprehensive insights into effectively identifying, managing, and mitigating the impact of toxic leaders within organizational

settings. Through the iterative process of the Delphi method, expert consensus was sought and achieved across four rounds of surveys, each building upon the insights of the previous one.

Round I

The first research question aimed to uncover strategies that could effectively manage the presence of toxic leaders within organizations. The consensus among the expert panel highlighted several vital strategies:

Leadership Development Programs

Experts have agreed that comprehensive leadership development programs focusing on emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and accountability are crucial. Such programs equip potential leaders with the necessary skills and foster a culture of transparency and integrity.

Regular Performance and Behavior Assessments

Implementing regular assessments of leadership behavior and performance was identified as a critical strategy. These assessments allow organizations to detect early signs of toxicity and address them proactively.

Clear Reporting Channels and Whistleblower Protections

Establishing precise mechanisms for reporting toxic behavior and robust protections for whistleblowers ensures that employees can report issues without fear of reprisal.

Creating a Culture of Accountability

Establishing a culture where accountability is not just a buzzword but a fundamental aspect of the organizational ethos was highlighted as crucial. This involves setting clear expectations for behavior and performance for leaders at all levels and ensuring that deviations are addressed promptly and fairly. Such a culture discourages the emergence and perpetuation of toxic behaviors by clarifying that such actions have tangible consequences.

Enhanced Communication Channels for Reporting Toxic Behavior

The experts noted the necessity of accessible and secure channels through which employees can report toxic behavior without fear of retribution. These channels should be backed by a straightforward, transparent process for investigating and addressing reports, ensuring employees feel heard and protected.

Fostering a Supportive and Inclusive Organizational Climate

A positive organizational climate where inclusivity, support, and mutual respect are ingrained can significantly diminish the breeding ground for toxic leadership. Initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion should be integral, ensuring all employees feel valued and supported.

Regular and Constructive Feedback Mechanisms

Instituting regular feedback sessions where leaders receive constructive feedback on their leadership style and its impact can be instrumental. These sessions should be framed positively, focusing on growth and improvement, and can include peer reviews, subordinate feedback, and self-reflection components.

Discrepant Cases

One participant suggested that in some cases, confrontation with the toxic leader, facilitated by an external mediator, could lead to positive changes. A noteworthy discrepant case involved a participant advocating for a more lenient approach towards leaders exhibiting mildly toxic behaviors, suggesting that mentorship and personal development plans could be sufficient. This perspective was less common among the panel and highlights the variability in approaches to managing toxicity within leadership.

Round II

Round II survey had participants rate the desirability and feasibility of the numerous descriptors the panel found in Round I. The initial analysis of this round used descriptive statistics facilitated by IBM SPSS (Version 28.0) to determine consensus. The process began with a granular analysis of each response median school with a threshold of 4 or higher and an IQR of 1 or below. The responses were systematically categorized based on their conceptual similarities and differences once meeting the threshold to continue in the study. Through an iterative process of comparison and contrast, these categories were then synthesized into overarching themes that encapsulated the essence of the participants' insights regarding strategies for managing, identifying, and mitigating organizational toxicity.

The coding framework was developed by closely examining the data, with initial codes being directly influenced by the participants' language and responses. For instance, codes such as *leadership accountability* and *communication transparency* were frequently cited across responses, highlighting their perceived importance in addressing

toxic leadership dynamics. Categories emerged from these initial codes, such as *organizational practices* and *leadership behaviors*, which grouped the related codes into conceptual clusters. From these categories, broader themes such as *institutional mechanisms for toxicity mitigation* and *leadership qualities and development* were distilled, capturing the collective wisdom of the expert panel. Participant quotations played a crucial role in underscoring the significance of these themes. For example, Participant 5564 noted, “Secretive people act in self-interest,” illustrating the critical role of *communication transparency* within the broader theme of *leadership qualities and development*. Such quotations lent authenticity to the thematic constructs and provided concrete examples of the participants’ perspectives.

Discrepant cases, or outlier responses that did not align with the emerging consensus, were carefully considered in the analysis. For instance, a few participants emphasized *individual resilience training* as a countermeasure to organizational toxicity, a viewpoint that diverged from the predominant focus on systemic and organizational strategies. These discrepant cases were examined, not disregarded, to understand their underlying rationale and potential implications for the broader thematic framework; including such divergent views not only enriched the analysis by providing alternative perspectives but also highlighted the complexity of addressing toxic leadership. Researchers argue that acknowledging all forms of evidence, including deviations, is essential to ensure the thoroughness and accuracy of qualitative analyses (Jirwe, 2011). By acknowledging and exploring these outliers, the study ensured a comprehensive

understanding of the expert panel's perspectives, strengthening the emergent themes' validity.

Round III

The study's Round III results provide insightful details on the behaviors, indicators, and organizational strategies effective in identifying toxic leaders within organizations. The section further explores the themes from all the codes and categories refined over the past two rounds. I delve deeper into each aspect based on how they address the three research questions of the study.

RQ1: What are effective strategies for managing toxic leaders?

RQ2: What are effective strategies to identify toxic leaders?

RQ3: What are effective strategies to mitigate organizational toxicity?

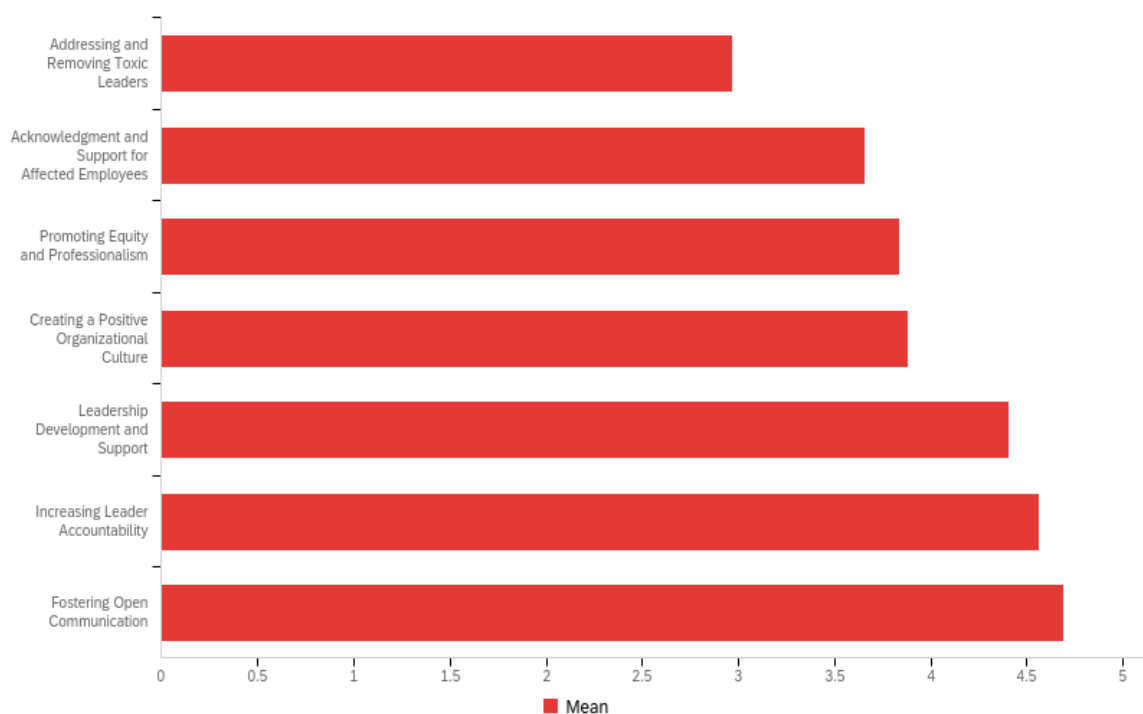
Managing Toxic Leaders

In this round, the panel of experts prioritized several strategies for managing toxic leaders, underscoring the complexity of addressing leadership issues (Figure 9). Its lowest mean score (2.97) indicates that the most effective strategy is directly *addressing and removing toxic leaders*. This action is deemed crucial for immediately mitigating toxicity in the organizational environment. Following this, *acknowledgment and support for affected employees* and *promoting equity and professionalism* were highly rated, emphasizing the importance of supporting the workforce and fostering an equitable workplace culture. In further strategies, *creating a positive organizational culture* and *leadership development and support* highlight the need for preventive measures that cultivate a healthy work environment and equip leaders with the skills to manage

effectively. These are complemented by *increasing leader accountability* and *fostering open communication*, essential for maintaining transparency and accountability within leadership roles.

Figure 9

Rankings for Managing Toxic Leaders

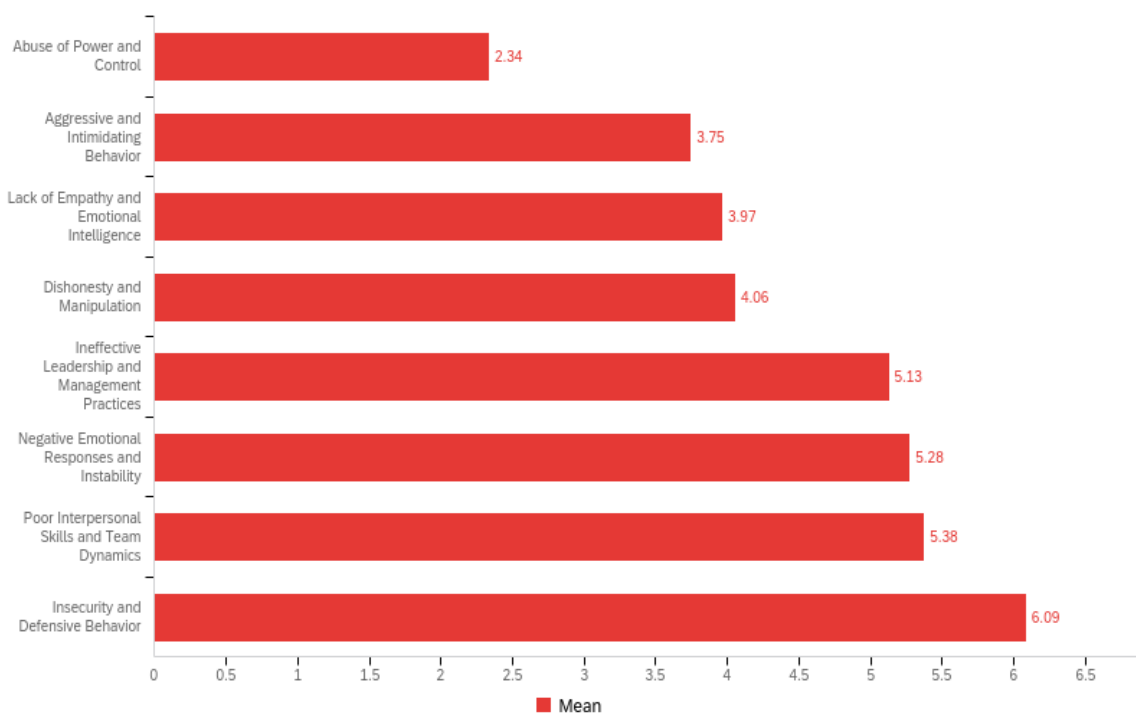


Collectively, these strategies form a comprehensive approach to managing toxic leaders, combining direct intervention with supportive and preventative measures to not only tackle existing issues but also prevent the emergence of toxic behaviors. By integrating direct interventions with supportive and preventative measures, organizations can effectively tackle existing toxicity and cultivate a leadership culture that deters such behaviors in the future. Together, these approaches mitigate the direct impacts of toxic leadership and foster a resilient and supportive organizational culture that can recover and

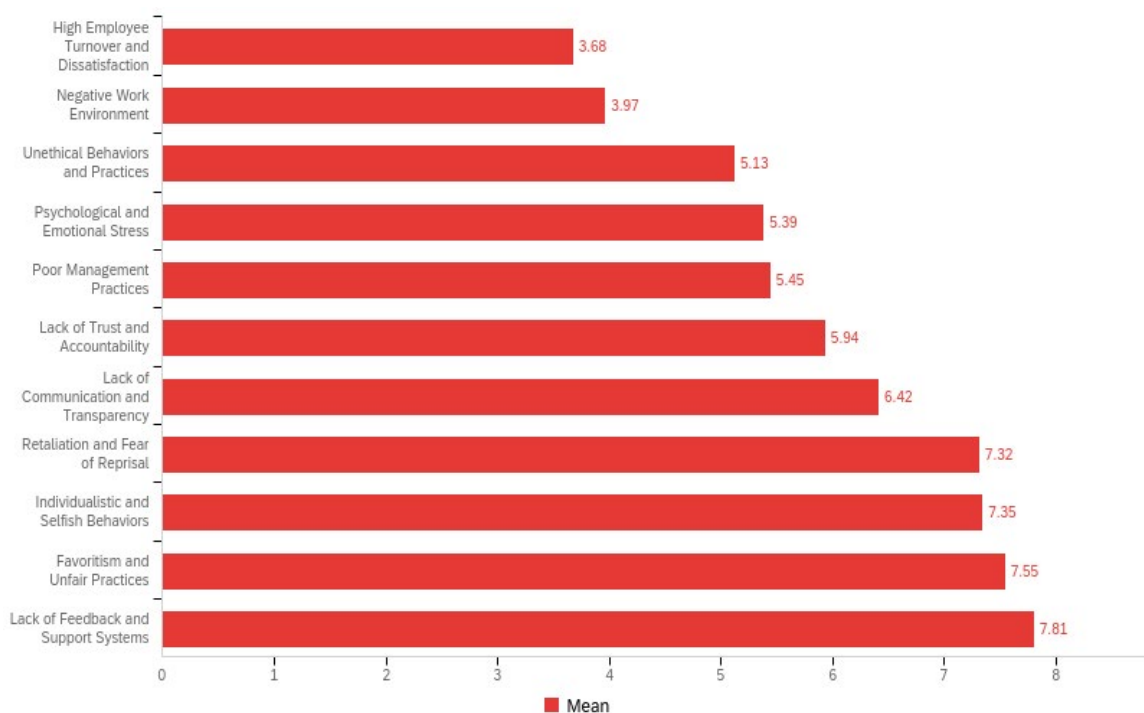
thrive post-intervention. The panel's significant ranking of these strategies strongly endorsed an integrated management approach, blending remedial actions with proactive support and cultural rehabilitation, which is essential for sustainable organizational health and effectiveness.

Identifying Toxic Leaders

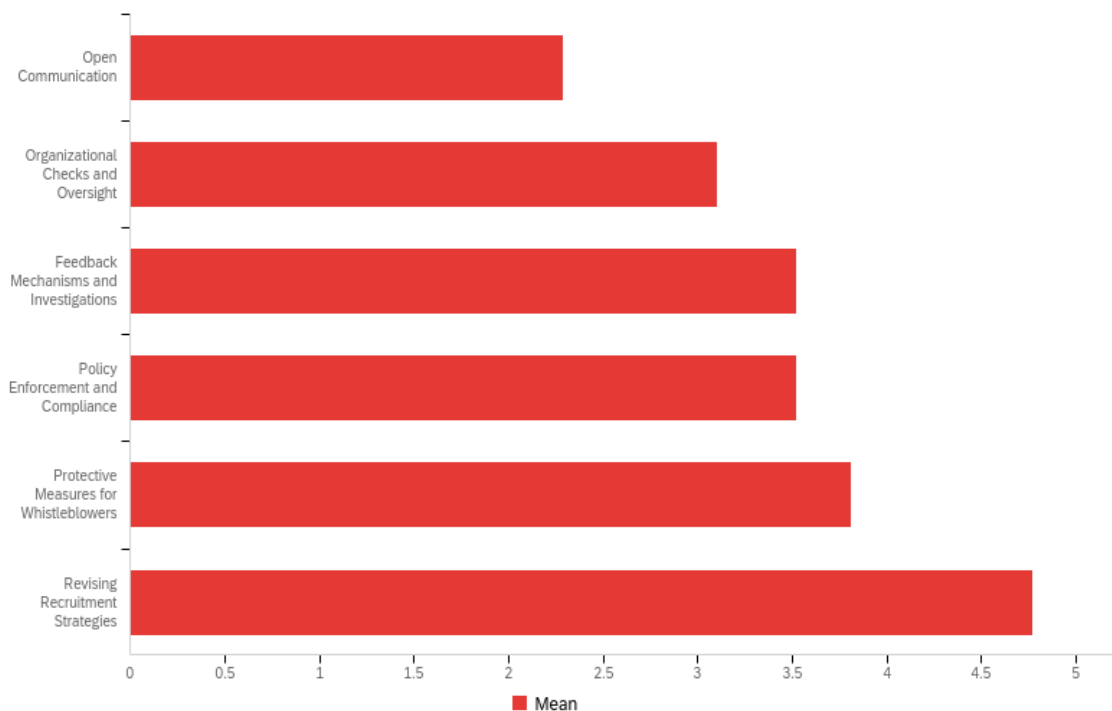
Behaviors and Traits Indicative of Toxic Leadership. The expert panel ranked *abuse of power and control* as the most telling behavior indicative of a toxic leader, emphasizing that such behavior often undermines trust and integrity within the organization (Figure 10). Following closely were *aggressive and intimidating behavior* and a *lack of empathy and emotional intelligence*, which disrupted team dynamics and eroded the psychological safety of the workplace. These behaviors are critical to identifying as they directly impact employee engagement and productivity. The ranking suggests a clear consensus that overt displays of control and aggression and a lack of emotional intelligence are fundamental red flags signaling toxic leadership.

Figure 10*Rankings of Behavior Indicators of Toxic Leadership*

Impact Indicators of Toxic Leadership. In terms of impact, *high employee turnover and dissatisfaction* (mean 3.68) and *negative work environment* (mean 3.97) were identified as the top indicators of the presence of toxic leadership (Figure 11). These factors reflect the immediate consequences of toxic leadership and serve as measurable indicators that can guide organizational interventions. The correlation between leadership behavior and workplace atmosphere is significant, as a toxic leader's impact is often most visible in employee morale and turnover rates, which can be quantitatively assessed for organizational reviews.

Figure 11*Rankings of Organizational Impacts Indicating Toxicity*

Effective Organizational Strategies for Early Identification. For early identification strategies, *open communication* was ranked most effective, with the lowest mean of (2.46), underscoring the importance of fostering an environment where employees feel safe to express concerns without fear of retribution (see Figure 12). Next is *organizational checks and oversight*, which includes regular reviews and audits of leadership behavior. Both strategies are essential for maintaining a healthy organizational culture and ensuring that toxic behaviors are identified and addressed promptly. The emphasis on *feedback mechanisms and investigations* further highlights the need for systemic approaches to monitoring and evaluating leadership, ensuring that toxic leaders are identified before their behavior escalates into more significant issues.

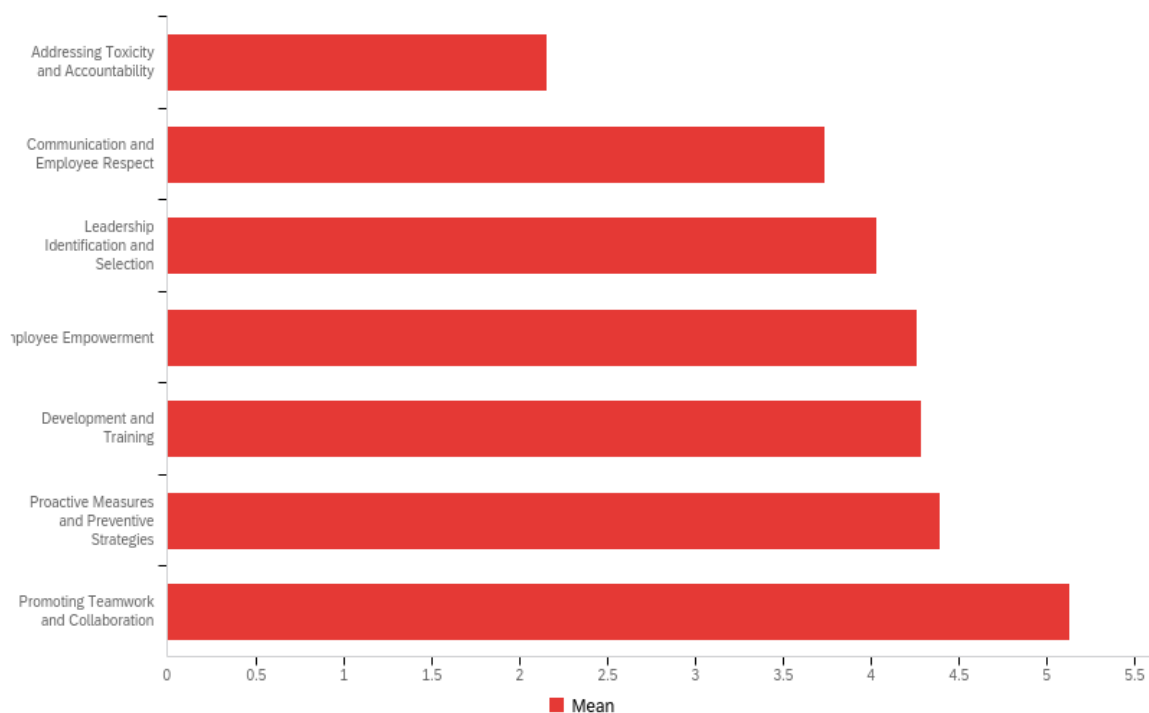
Figure 12*Rankings of Early Indicators of Toxicity*

The round's findings underscore the importance of proactive measures in identifying organizational toxic leaders. By concentrating on explicit, observable behaviors that signal toxic tendencies and integrating robust systems for feedback and communication, organizations can significantly enhance their ability to spot and address such leadership issues before they escalate. Implementing systematic feedback mechanisms enables continuous monitoring and swift action, helping to maintain a healthy organizational culture. Moreover, effective communication systems ensure that concerns are not only voiced but are also heard and acted upon, fostering an environment of transparency and accountability. These strategies are crucial for empowering

employees and creating a workplace where toxic leadership is quickly identified and effectively managed.

Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity

Strategies to Mitigate the Effects of Toxic Leaders. The study results prioritize *addressing toxicity and accountability* as the most effective strategy for mitigating the effects of toxic leaders, evidenced by the lowest mean score (2.16). The findings underscore the importance of holding leaders accountable and taking decisive actions to address toxicity directly. The following most effective strategies, as seen in Figure 13, include *communication and employee respect* and *leadership identification and selection*, highlighting the role of clear, respectful communication and the careful selection of leaders in fostering a non-toxic environment. Additional strategies such as *employee empowerment* and *development and training* emphasize enhancing employees' ability to contribute to and influence their work environments, thereby reducing the impact of toxic leadership.

Figure 13*Rankings for Mitigating Toxicity*

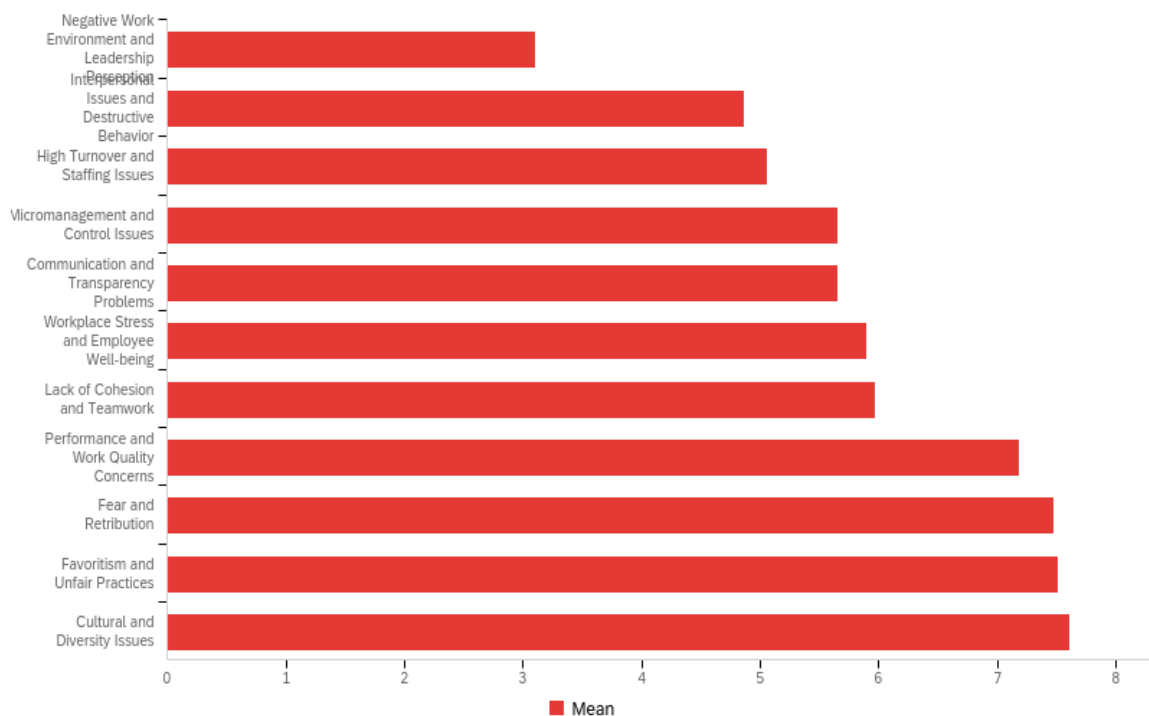
Indicators of Organizational Toxicity. The ranking of indicators for organizational toxicity revealed that a *negative work environment and leadership perception* (mean 3.1) were the most significant signs of toxicity, indicating that a hostile atmosphere is a clear red flag. Following this, *interpersonal issues and destructive behavior* (mean 4.87) and *high turnover and staffing issues* (mean 5.06) were identified as crucial indicators. These factors, as seen in Figure 14, suggest that where there are frequent interpersonal conflicts and high turnover rates, there likely exists an underlying issue of toxic leadership. Other critical indicators include *micromanagement and control issues* and *communication and transparency problems*, pointing to the operational symptoms of a toxic environment. The detailed hierarchy of indicators helps

organizations pinpoint specific areas of concern, allowing for targeted interventions.

These indicators are critical metrics for organizations to monitor, recognize, and address toxicity early.

Figure 14

Rankings Indicating Presence of Toxicity

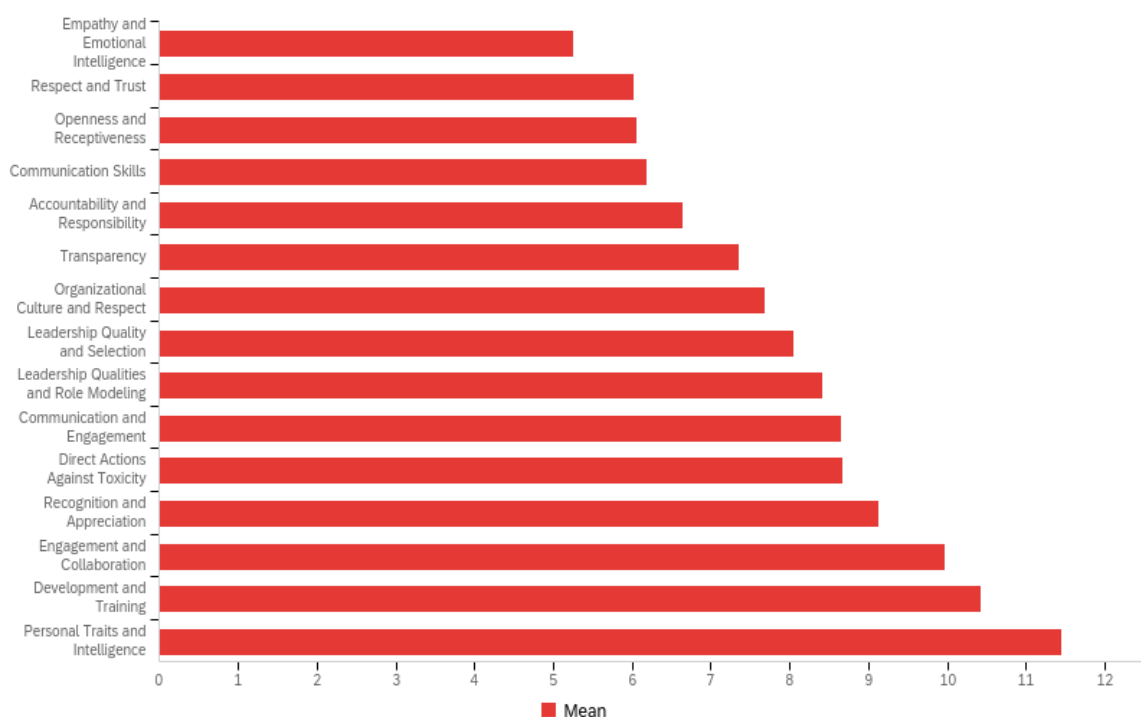


Effective Leadership Skills and Strategies. In analyzing practical leadership skills and strategies for preventing organizational toxicity, the participant results emphasize *empathy and emotional intelligence* (mean 5.26) as the most effective leadership skills, highlighting their crucial role in understanding and addressing the needs and emotions of employees. *Respect and trust* (mean 6.03) and *openness and receptiveness* (mean 6.06) are closely followed, which foster a supportive and inclusive work environment, as seen in Figure 15. These leadership qualities are vital in creating a

culture where issues can be discussed openly and without fear, promoting a healthier organizational atmosphere. Further down the list, *communication skills*, *accountability*, and *responsibility* also score significantly, underscoring their importance in maintaining clarity and ensuring leaders are answerable for their actions, which are essential for reducing toxicity within organizations.

Figure 15

Rankings of Effective Leader Skills



Together, these strategies and indicators provide a comprehensive framework for mitigating and preventing organizational toxicity. Organizations can effectively reduce the prevalence and impact of toxic behaviors by focusing on proactive accountability measures, fostering an environment of communication and respect, carefully selecting and developing leaders, and emphasizing essential leadership qualities. The holistic

approach addresses issues and sets the foundation for a sustained positive organizational culture, ensuring long-term health and effectiveness.

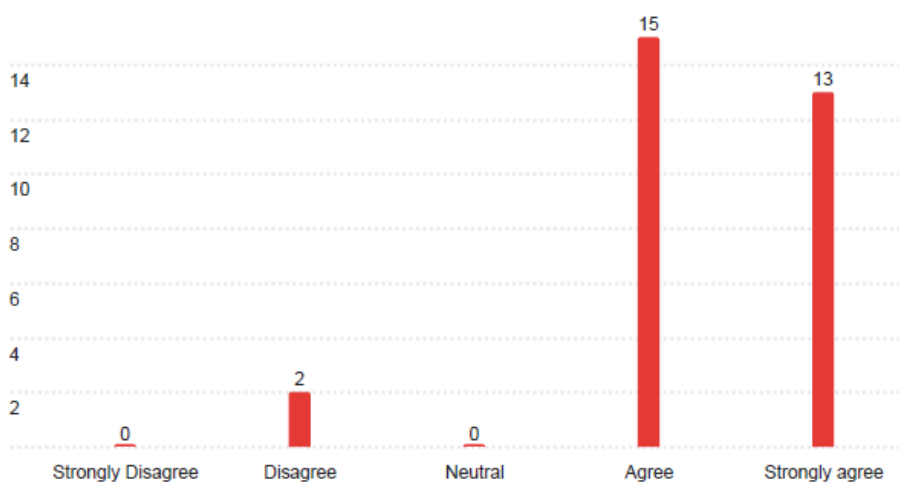
Round IV

In the fourth and final round of this study, participants were asked to evaluate their level of agreement or disagreement with the ranking of solutions derived from the results of the Round III questionnaire. The goal was to gain a consensus of at least 70% for each component of the strategies for identifying and managing toxic leaders and mitigating organizational toxicity. For the Round IV results, the data resulted in consensus for six out of the seven questions on the survey. The Round IV rankings participants voted on, along with the questionnaire, can be found in (Appendix D). The findings from the first question of this round highlighted a strong consensus among participants regarding the key traits that support the identification of toxic leaders, with a particular emphasis on the central role of abuse of power. The level of consensus for the rankings under Identifying Toxic Leaders: Behaviors and Traits of Toxic Leaders was 93%, which can be found in Figure 16.

Figure 16*Toxic Leader Traits Ranking Consensus Results***Q4 - Identifying Toxic Leaders: Behaviors and Traits of Toxic Leaders**

1. Abuse of Power and Control
2. Aggressive and Intimidating Behavior
3. Lack of Empathy and Emotional Intelligence
4. Dishonesty and Manipulation
5. Ineffective Leadership and Management Practices
6. Negative Emotional Responses and Instability
7. Poor Interpersonal Skills and Team Dynamics
8. Insecurity and Defensive Behavior

30 Responses



A thematic analysis of the open-ended responses uncovered several recurring themes that offer deeper insights into participants' views on toxic leadership. An essential aspect of toxic leadership is acknowledging that the misuse of authority and dominance is a core component, frequently resulting in further detrimental actions like manipulation, intimidation, and emotional volatility. Based on the level of agreement shown above, the panel agreed that abuse of power ranked at the top for identifying toxic leaders. However, one participant provided insights essential to consider, stating:

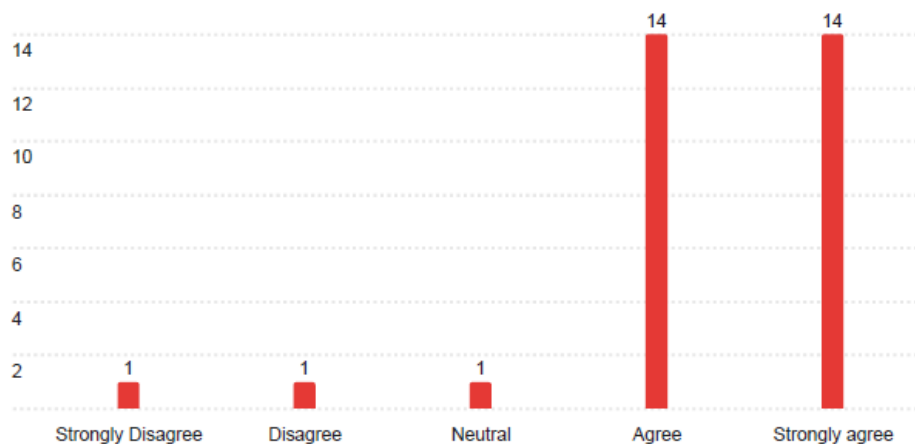
While I agree that all of the traits listed are characteristic traits of toxic leaders, I feel that "Insecurity and Defensive Behavior" should be much higher on the list

than it is, as most toxic leadership is born out of some measure of insecurity that the individual has that they feel they need to compensate for by exercising power and control over others.

The next question also regards the identification of toxic leaders, more specifically, signs of an organization impacted by toxicity. The goal was to establish rankings on indicators of organizational discord and dysfunction due to toxicity. The panel reached a consensus rate of 93%, as found in Figure 17. The thematic analysis of the open-ended questions revealed several key themes relating to how toxicity impacts the organization's culture and employees, giving possible insights into what leadership must look out for within the organization. Most of the panel agreed that high turnover was a big sign of a toxic organization because employees feel unappreciated, lack motivation, and are pressured to resign, disturbing the stability of the business and indicating underlying systemic problems. A participant further iterated, "Employees often feel demotivated and undervalued, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and a lack of enthusiasm for their work."

Figure 17*Organizational Toxicity Ranking Consensus Results*

Q6 - Identifying Toxic Leaders: Signs of Organizational Impact by Toxic Leaders 1. High Employee Turnover and Dissatisfaction 2. Negative Work Environment 3. Unethical Behaviors and Practices 4. Psychological and Emotional Stress 5. Poor Management Practices 6. Lack of Trust and Accountability 7. Lack of Communication and Transparency 8. Retaliation and Fear of Reprisal 9. Individualistic and Selfish Behaviors 10. Favoritism and Unfair Practices 11. Lack of Feedback and Support Systems



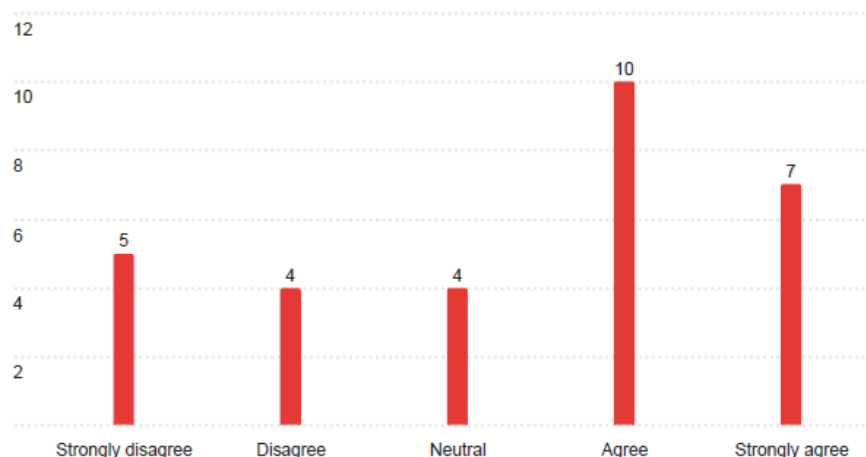
The next question of the survey was also on identifying toxic leaders but from the perspective of policies organizations should put in place to aid in the identification. The question only received a level of consensus of 56%, indicating a divergence of the panel's opinions (Figure 18). There was substantial agreement that policies, including open communication and organizational oversight, were essential for organizations. However, there were low confidence levels in revising recruitment strategies where participants were skeptical that toxic leaders could be found during the hiring process and are more preventative.

Figure 18

Identification Strategies Ranking Consensus Results

Q8 - Identifying Toxic Leaders: Policies for Identifying Toxic Leaders
 1. Open Communication 2. Organizational Checks and Oversight 3. Feedback Mechanisms and Investigations 4. Policy Enforcement and Compliance 5. Protective Measures for Whistleblowers 6. Revising Recruitment Strategies

30 Responses



A participant mentioned,

I am not sure specific policies can “identify” toxic leaders. For example, toxic leaders can still slip through revised recruitment strategies. However, policies can certainly help deal with them or remove them once they are identified. Policies can also hold leaders accountable for not being toxic, highlighting that the list needs practical and empirical data on long-term effectiveness within real organizations. Additionally, the list highlights the diversity of toxicity impacting organizations, and there is no one-size-fits-all cure-all for organizations.

Participants found that organizations with feedback mechanisms are great tools for identifying toxic leaders because they are more likely to find them within the

organization. The consolidated feedback further underscores the need for a specialized multifaceted approach with the flexibility to tailor it to multiple organizations. The lack of consensus also highlights the need for further refinement of the definitions and strategies for identifying toxic leaders, ensuring they include varied experiences and perspectives within the workplace.

The next question asked about strategies to manage toxic leaders, shifting from the identification phase. Achieving a level of consensus at 86%, the rankings in Figure 19 illustrate a high level of consensus with the panel. The panel provided overwhelming support for addressing and removing toxic leaders as the most direct and effective method to restore a healthy organization. One participant likened toxic leadership to a “sickness in the body,” suggesting that its removal is necessary for the organization to begin healing. Another participant echoed this sentiment: “Toxic managers absolutely must be removed.” Participants also showed great support for acknowledgment and support for affected employees, citing that healing is truly the way to restore an organizational culture and environment. One participant noted, “Acknowledging affected team members would build trust and boost morale.”

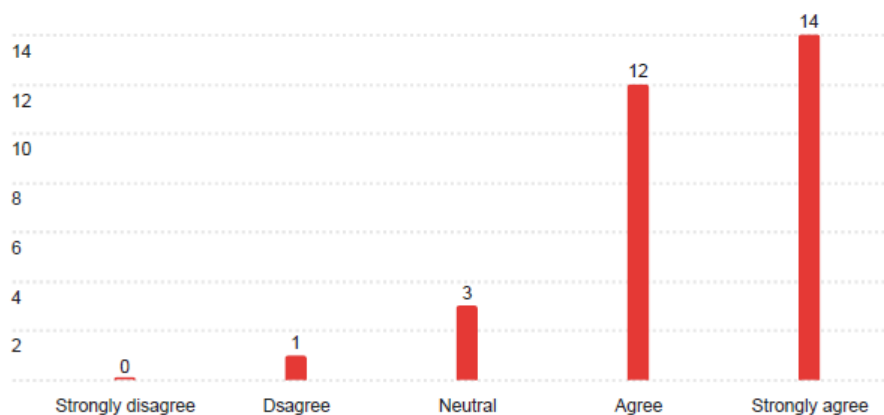
Figure 19

Management Strategies Ranking Consensus Results

Q10 - Strategies for Managing Toxic Leaders

1. Addressing and Removing Toxic Leaders 2. Acknowledgment and Support for Affected Employees 3. Promoting Equity and Professionalism 4. Creating a Positive Organizational Culture 5. Leadership Development and Support 6. Increasing Leader Accountability 7. Fostering Open Communication

30 Responses



Moving into the final data category for strategies, the next question focused on mitigating and preventing organizational toxicity, specifically addressing known toxicity's impacts. The question received a level of consensus at 80%, indicating strong alignment with the value and need for these strategies (see Figure 20). The strategy of addressing toxicity and ensuring accountability received the most support, with one participant stating, "Accountability is the most effective tool for dealing with toxicity in the workplace. The biggest factor for the growth of toxicity is a lack of accountability." Overall, there was a strong consensus that combining these strategies is necessary to effectively mitigate the effects of organizational toxicity. One participant summarized,

“All of these sound like great ways to minimize and alleviate workplace organizational toxicity.”

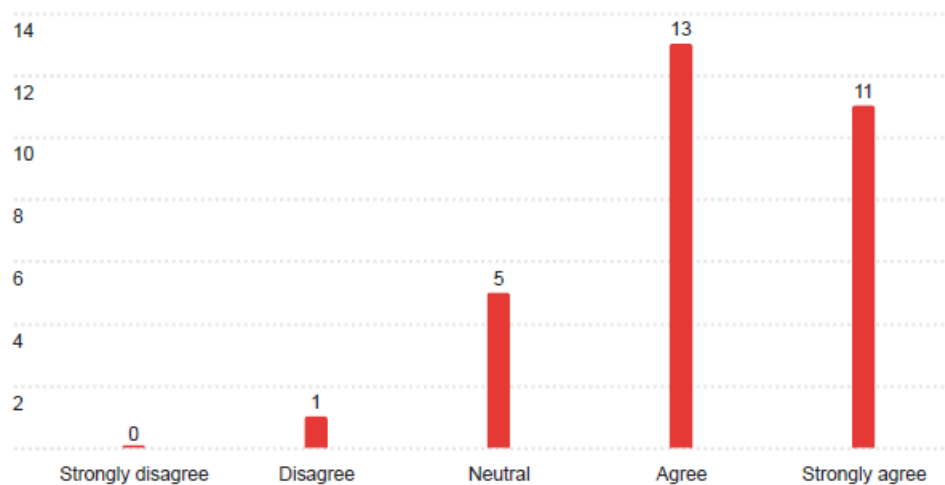
Figure 20

Mitigating Toxicity Strategies Ranking Consensus Results

Q12 - Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Methods for Mitigating Effects of Toxic Leaders

1. Addressing Toxicity and Accountability 2. Communication and Employee Respect 3. Leadership Identification and Selection 4. Employee Empowerment 5. Development and Training 6. Proactive Measures and Preventive Strategies 7. Promoting Teamwork and Collaboration

30 Responses



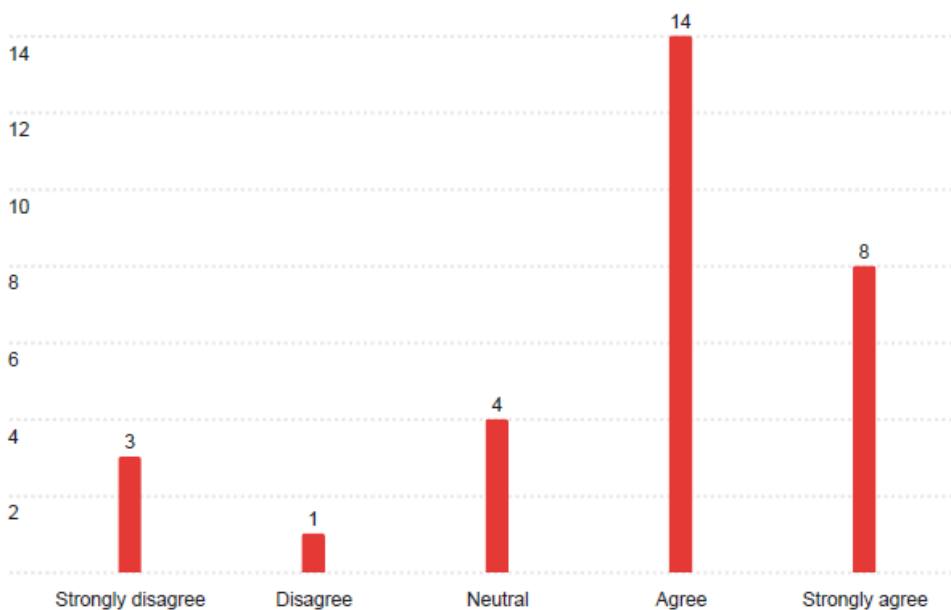
The next question represented rankings of strategies for Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Identification of Organizational Toxicity. Receiving an overall 73% level of consensus from the panel, the rankings provided illustrate a high level of need in organizational practices. The breakdown of consensus is shown in Figure 21. A participant agreeing with the overall approach stated, “These are all key factors in identifying a toxic workplace. If a general lack of trust in leadership causes low morale,

then it is safe to say you have a toxic workplace.” The panel expressed that trust and morale play a critical role in managing a healthy work environment, and the strategies supporting employees would positively affect the organizational culture. One participant did overall agree with the ranking; however, they expressed insightful concern about some overlap in the strategies, citing, “I feel like this list could be trimmed down quite a bit and even condensed, as several of the identified topics overlap each other in many ways.” Another participant added, “All of these must be spelled out in much more detail with an eye for keeping the ideas and programs separate from the chain of command.” The comments shared doubt about the practical application of these strategies in large organizations while also adding concerns about effectively addressing organizational toxicity in complex environments.

Figure 21

Identifying Toxicity Strategies Ranking Consensus Results

Q14 - Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Identification of Organizational Toxicity 1. Negative Work Environment and Leadership Perception 2. Interpersonal Issues and Destructive Behavior 3. High Turnover and Staffing Issues 4. Micromanagement and Control Issues 5. Communication and Transparency Problems 6. Workplace Stress and Employee Well-being 7. Lack of Cohesion and Teamwork 8. Performance and Work Quality Concerns 9. Fear and Retribution 10. Favoritism and Unfair Practices 11. Cultural and Diversity Issues
30 Responses



The last question for the Round IV questionnaire was titled Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Skills and Methods for Preventing Toxicity. The 80% level of consensus emphasizes shared support for the effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating and preventing organizational toxicity (see Figure 22). For example, one participant strongly supported the list, stating, “These strategies are very

positive in preventing a toxic work environment and promoting a culture of quality. Acknowledging team members' accomplishments will strengthen morale within the workplace." The panel also provided insights into the practicality of implementing the strategies, although it agreed with the list. One participant commented, "All of these must be spelled out in much more detail with an eye for keeping the ideas and programs separate from the chain of command." The comments stress the need for clear and actionable plans to implement these strategies effectively.

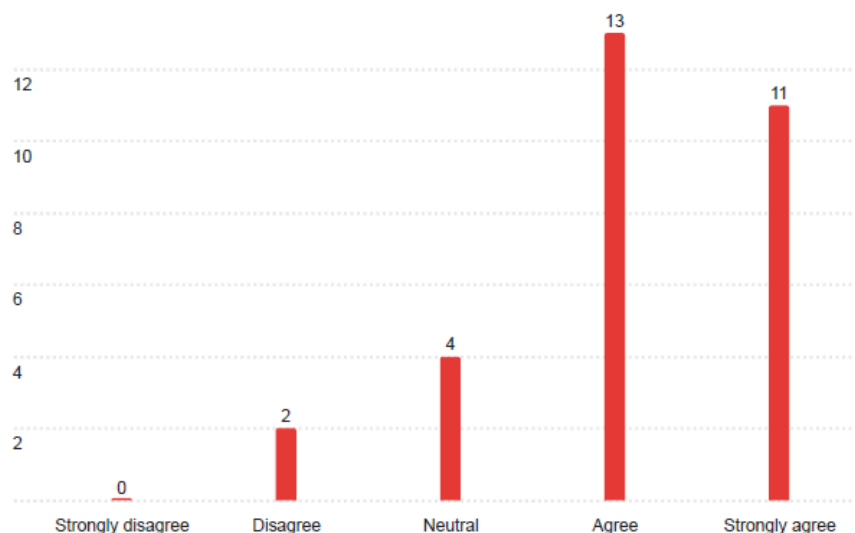
Figure 22

Preventing Toxicity Strategies Ranking Consensus Results

Q16 - Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Skills and Methods for Preventing Toxicity

1. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence 2. Respect and Trust 3. Openness and Receptiveness 4. Communication Skills 5. Accountability and Responsibility 6. Transparency 7. Organizational Culture and Respect 8. Leadership Quality and Selection 9. Leadership Qualities and Role Modeling 10. Communication and Engagement 11. Direct Actions Against Toxicity 12. Recognition and Appreciation 13. Engagement and Collaboration 14. Development and Training 15. Personal Traits and Intelligence

30 Responses



Summary

Addressing the core research questions of this study has yielded pragmatic strategies to confront the challenges posed by toxic leadership within organizations. For RQ1, fostering an environment of accountability and reinforcing ethical behavior is a pivotal strategy in managing toxic leaders. By setting clear expectations and consequences, organizations can deter detrimental leadership behaviors and promote a leadership model based on integrity and respect. In addressing RQ2, the findings underscore the significance of vigilant and transparent recruitment and monitoring practices to identify potential toxic leaders before they harm the organization. Implementing comprehensive background checks, behavioral assessments, and ongoing evaluations is critical to recognizing early warning signs. Concerning RQ3, the study suggests a proactive stance in creating a supportive culture that counters toxicity, which involves institutionalizing open communication, continuous education on ethical conduct, and accessible support systems for those affected by toxic behaviors.

The data supporting these findings come from the voices of experienced professionals who participated in this Delphi study. Their insights and nonconforming data have been instrumental in shaping a nuanced understanding of how to approach toxic leadership. In Chapter 5, these findings will serve as a springboard for discussing their practical applications and implications for future research. The final chapter aims to transform the theoretical insights from this study into actionable guidelines that can aid organizations in cultivating healthy, toxicity-free work environments. The forthcoming discussion will draw upon the study's conclusions to propose recommendations for

leaders and organizations seeking to navigate the complex landscape of organizational dynamics.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to build consensus among leadership experts across the United States on how to identify and manage toxic leaders and mitigate organizational toxicity effectively. Using a qualitative Delphi methodology, this research engaged leadership experts across the United States to reach a consensus on the most effective approaches to counteract the negative influence of toxic leaders in the workplace. The method was chosen for its robustness in facilitating expert consensus and effectiveness in addressing complex phenomena needing substantial empirical research.

The findings from this study reveal a multifaceted approach to combatting toxic leadership, emphasizing the importance of proactive measures, leadership development programs, and organizational policy enhancements. Key strategies include implementing comprehensive 360-degree feedback mechanisms, regular ethical training, and enforcing policies against toxic behaviors. These strategies are designed to detect and address instances of toxic leadership and foster an organizational culture that promotes ethical behavior and discourages the emergence of toxic traits.

In this chapter, I discuss these findings in depth, considering their implications for theory and practice, and provide recommendations for future research to explore further and refine the strategies identified. By addressing the gaps in the current literature and suggesting areas for continued study, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how organizations can effectively safeguard against toxic leadership and promote a healthier, more productive workplace environment.

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of toxic leadership and offer crucial insights into effective interventions. By meticulously comparing these findings with existing peer-reviewed literature, this analysis seeks to ascertain the extent to which the results confirm, disconfirm, or extend previous knowledge within the field of organizational behavior. Through this detailed examination, the study contributes significantly to both theoretical and practical understandings of how toxic leadership can be effectively addressed in varied organizational settings.

The findings of this study regarding effective strategies for managing toxic leaders within organizations are contextualized through the Delphi method, where a consensus was reached among experts. The results align with and extend existing scholarly literature by confirming the critical need for direct interventions, such as removing toxic leaders, a widely advocated approach in leadership management studies (Tavanti, 2008). Furthermore, the findings enhance understanding by highlighting the importance of supporting affected employees and promoting a positive organizational culture. These strategies aim to rectify immediate issues and foster a preventive environment that discourages the development of toxic behaviors.

Effective Strategies for Managing Toxic Leaders

In addressing RQ1 regarding effective strategies for managing toxic leaders, the study's findings underscore the pivotal role of decisive and direct interventions. Specifically, the strategy of *addressing and removing toxic leaders*, highlighted by its

lowest mean score of 2.97, emerged as the most crucial action for immediate toxicity mitigation. The direct approach is supported by existing literature, which underscores the necessity of removing or significantly addressing leaders who exhibit toxic behaviors to protect organizational health (Williams, 2018). A significant theme that emerged was the support for accountability and proactive measures in managing toxic leadership. Many participants emphasized empowering employees and promoting teamwork as foundational elements for a healthy organizational culture.

Subsequent strategies, *acknowledgment and support for affected employees*, and *promoting equity and professionalism* were highly rated, highlighting the importance of addressing the perpetrators and supporting the workforce affected by toxic behaviors. The dual approach of removal and support aligns with the literature that recognizes the comprehensive impacts of toxic leadership on employee well-being and organizational culture (Smith & Griffiths, 2022). The study found a need to acknowledge and support employees affected by toxic leadership, which was also frequently cited, as this approach helps to rebuild trust and morale. The high level of consensus underscores a shared belief in the value of these strategies for managing toxic leadership. The findings suggest that while there is strong support for the proposed approaches, successful implementation requires ongoing effort and a commitment to continuous improvement in leadership practices and organizational culture.

Furthermore, the emphasis on *creating a positive organizational culture*, integrating strategies like *leadership development and support*, and *increasing leader accountability* suggests a broader perspective on managing toxic leadership through

preventive measures. These strategies focus on cultivating a healthy work environment and equipping leaders with the necessary skills to foster positive interactions, which extends the discourse beyond immediate remediation to long-term prevention (Johnson, 2016). Collectively, these findings confirm the literature's call for robust management of toxic leaders and extend it by detailing a combined approach of intervention, support, and culture enhancement. The comprehensive management model reflects a deeper understanding of the nuanced measures necessary to effectively combat toxicity within leadership roles.

Effective Strategies to Identify Toxic Leaders

In addressing RQ2 on effective strategies to identify toxic leaders, the Delphi study's findings provide detailed insights through specific behavioral indicators and organizational strategies. The panel of experts identified *abuse of power and control* as the most telling behavior indicative of toxic leadership. It ranked highest with the lowest mean score, reflecting its critical impact on organizational trust and integrity. Closely following were *aggressive and intimidating behavior* and a *lack of empathy and emotional intelligence*, which disrupted team dynamics and compromised the psychological safety of the workplace.

Moreover, the rankings of impact indicators such as *high employee turnover and dissatisfaction* and a *negative work environment* provide measurable criteria that organizations can monitor as early warning signs of toxic leadership. These indicators reflect the immediate consequences of toxic leadership and guide organizational interventions aimed at mitigating such impacts. Another recurring element was

establishing a hostile work environment, marked by dread, mistrust, and poor morale. The workplace was perceived as fertile ground for other issues, such as decreased productivity, heightened stress, and a deterioration in collaboration, eventually resulting in lasting harm to the organization's culture and performance. Participants expressed substantial worry over the psychological and emotional impact on employees caused by toxic leadership. They highlighted the stress and mental health concerns that frequently occur as a result, leading to burnout and reduced job satisfaction. Participants highlighted the extensive impact of toxic behaviors, emphasizing that these behaviors spread across the company, leading to widespread dysfunction and undermining organizational coherence.

The *open communication* strategy was highlighted as the most effective for early identification, emphasizing the importance of fostering an environment where employees feel safe to express concerns without fear of retribution. There was consensus from the panel that communication channels should be clear, accessible, and well-publicized to ensure that all employees feel empowered to use them. The strategy is complemented by *organizational checks and oversight*, which includes regular reviews and audits of leadership behavior to ensure toxic behaviors are promptly identified and addressed. These findings suggest that a systematic approach, integrating clear behavioral indicators with robust feedback mechanisms, significantly enhances an organization's ability to detect and manage toxic leaders effectively.

Effective Strategies to Mitigate Organizational Toxicity

In addressing RQ3 regarding strategies to mitigate organizational toxicity, the Delphi study illuminates several practical approaches. The strategy *addressing toxicity and accountability* received the highest ranking with the lowest mean score (2.16), indicating its paramount importance in holding leaders accountable and directly tackling toxic behaviors. The finding underscores the necessity of decisive actions in creating a non-toxic environment, aligning with the literature emphasizing robust accountability mechanisms (Hughes, 2022).

Further strategies include *communication, employee respect, and leadership identification and selection*, crucial for fostering a transparent and respectful workplace culture. These strategies help mitigate the effects of toxic leadership by ensuring that leaders are carefully chosen and that communication channels remain open and respectful, thus maintaining organizational health. Lastly, *employee empowerment and development and training* were identified as vital in empowering employees to have a voice and influence in their work environment, which can significantly reduce the impact of toxic leadership. These findings extend current knowledge by providing actionable strategies emphasizing empowerment and proactive cultural development in mitigating toxicity.

Limitations of the Study

The section outlines the limitations encountered during the execution of this study, focusing mainly on issues related to trustworthiness. These limitations are crucial

for understanding the context and boundaries within which the study's findings should be interpreted.

Sample Size and Composition

The study was limited by the size and composition of the expert panel involved in the Delphi method. While efforts were made to include a diverse range of experts in terms of geographic location and field of expertise, the relatively small number of participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the panel did not fully represent all potential sectors that may be affected by toxic leadership, such as non-profit organizations or smaller startups, which may face unique challenges not addressed by this study.

Methodological Constraints

The qualitative nature of the Delphi method, while invaluable for gaining in-depth insights and consensus among experts, poses limitations in terms of statistical generalization. Unlike quantitative studies, the findings from a Delphi study are not meant to be extrapolated to a larger population but rather provide a conceptual understanding based on expert opinions. The methodological choice restricts the ability to quantify the impact and prevalence of toxic leadership across different settings.

Potential Bias

Another significant limitation is the potential for bias in selecting experts and their subjective interpretations of what constitutes toxic leadership. While a strength in gathering specialized knowledge, reliance on expert opinion can also lead to biases based

on personal experiences and theoretical preferences. The subjective element might influence the consensus reached, affecting the objectivity of the study's outcomes.

Data Interpretation

The interpretation of qualitative data in a Delphi study is inherently subjective and depends heavily on the researcher's perspective. Although measures were taken to mitigate researcher bias (such as member checking and data triangulation), the interpretative nature of analyzing qualitative responses may still influence the conclusions drawn. The limitation affects the trustworthiness of the findings as different researchers might interpret the same data differently.

Recommendations

Building upon the findings and identified limitations of this study and the extensive review of literature presented in Chapter 2, this section offers structured recommendations to advance research on toxic leadership within various organizational contexts. The necessity for a broader sample became apparent in this study, which primarily engaged experts from sectors based in the United States. Expanding the participant pool to include diverse geographic and sectoral representations would enhance the generalizability and relevance of the findings across different cultural and organizational settings. Future research should strive to incorporate perspectives from underrepresented sectors, such as non-profits and startups, which may face unique challenges in leadership dynamics not covered in this study (see Shiferaw et al., 2023).

Moreover, integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods could address some of the methodological limitations noted in this study. A mixed-methods approach

would allow for a more comprehensive analysis, combining the depth of qualitative insights with the empirical robustness of quantitative data. Such an approach would be particularly beneficial in validating the qualitative findings and exploring the broader applicability and effectiveness of identified strategies for mitigating toxic leadership. These explorations can uncover new themes and subtleties about toxic behavior that are not immediately apparent through surveys alone. Following this, quantitative methods such as surveys or experimental designs can be used to measure these behaviors' widespread within different populations or to test the efficacy of specific interventions across a broader setting.

There is also a significant opportunity for longitudinal research to assess the long-term effects of interventions designed to combat toxic leadership. Tracking these interventions over time would provide valuable insights into their sustainability and the evolution of organizational leadership practices (Hassan et al., 2023). Additionally, future studies could explore the potential of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, to detect early signs of toxic leadership more effectively. Research into the ethical implications and practical applications of these technologies could significantly advance leadership monitoring and intervention strategies (Highhouse, 2019).

Cultural influences on leadership behaviors and perceptions also merit further exploration. Given the global nature of many modern organizations, understanding how cultural differences affect the perception and tolerance of toxic leadership could enhance the development of more culturally sensitive leadership strategies (Tsai, 2022). Lastly,

there is a need to focus more on the experiences of followers dealing with toxic leaders, exploring how these dynamics impact their well-being and productivity. Such studies would provide a more balanced view of toxic leadership's effects, contributing to more effective follower-centered interventions (Lipman-Blumen, 2004).

Assessments of organizational structures are recommended because they significantly influence leadership dynamics. Different structures, such as hierarchical versus flat or matrix versus functional, have distinct impacts on the distribution of power and oversight, which can either mitigate or exacerbate toxic leadership behaviors. Future research should focus on how these structural differences affect the emergence and control of toxic leadership within organizations. Investigating whether specific organizational structures provide natural checks that prevent toxic behavior or allow such behaviors to thrive due to lack of adequate oversight could offer valuable insights into organizational design and its role in fostering healthy leadership environments (Aycaan et al., 2018).

Finally, there is a critical need for specific, empirically tested interventions tailored to combat toxic leadership behaviors. Future studies should aim to design, implement, and rigorously evaluate targeted anti-toxicity programs and policies. The studies could include innovations in hiring practices to screen potential leaders for toxic traits. These leadership training modules specifically address these behaviors and mentorship programs to cultivate positive leadership qualities. Using experimental and quasi-experimental designs to assess these interventions' effectiveness could provide a solid empirical basis for widely implementing successful strategies (Bryman, 2004).

Exploring these aspects of toxic leadership and its mitigation can provide organizations with evidence-based strategies that are not only theoretically sound but also practically effective.

Recommendations for Practice

Organizations are advised to take proactive steps in training leaders and developing policies that explicitly address the nuances of toxic leadership. The steps include establishing regular assessments of leadership behavior, creating a safe space for employee feedback, and implementing systematic approaches to developing leadership skills rooted in ethical principles. For example, studies could use experimental designs where one group of leaders receives training, and another does not, with subsequent measurement of changes in leadership behavior and employee outcomes. These practices not only help in curtailing toxic leadership but also contribute to building a resilient organizational culture that upholds dignity and respect for every member.

To effectively combat toxic leadership, organizations must establish clear and accessible feedback and reporting mechanisms. These systems should allow employees at all levels to report toxic behaviors anonymously without fear of retaliation. To enhance the effectiveness of these mechanisms, organizations should also develop a structured process for investigating reports and taking appropriate actions. Not only does this help in addressing issues promptly, but it also reinforces a culture of transparency and accountability. Regular training on using these systems effectively should be provided to all employees to ensure they are comfortable and confident in reporting issues

(Zaghmout, 2024). Creating a workplace culture prioritizing transparency and accountability can significantly deter toxic leadership.

To proactively manage toxic leadership, organizations should regularly assess their organizational health. The assessments can include surveys and focus groups that seek to understand employee experiences and perceptions of leadership within the organization. These assessments can provide early warning signs of potential problems and help track the effectiveness of interventions over time. Data gathered from these assessments should be analyzed carefully to inform continuous improvement efforts, ensuring that interventions are responsive to the organization's evolving needs (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). A key recommendation is for organizational leaders to realize the importance of applying this study's actionable strategies that might continually improve employee welfare and workplace performance.

Implications

The findings of this study on toxic leadership hold significant implications for positive social change across multiple levels, from individual to organizational and even societal. By addressing toxic leadership effectively, organizations can foster healthier work environments, enhance employee well-being, and ultimately influence broader societal norms regarding workplace behavior and leadership ethics. On the individual level, addressing toxic leadership can significantly improve employee well-being and mental health. Research shows that positive leadership practices are associated with lower stress levels and higher employee engagement and satisfaction. The improved

workplace environment fosters greater individual productivity and professional fulfillment, enhancing career development (Arnold, 2017).

When employees experience less stress at work, they are less likely to suffer from burnout and are more likely to maintain better overall health, which can lead to reduced healthcare costs and improved quality of life. Recommendations include implementing regular training programs focused on emotional intelligence and conflict resolution, which equip employees to manage better and mitigate the impacts of toxic behaviors they may encounter. The impact of reducing organizational toxicity extends to employees' family lives. Work-related stress significantly contributes to familial tension and conflict; reducing this stress allows employees to engage more positively at home. Effective management of toxic leadership can enhance work-life balance, leading to more stable and supportive home environments. A supportive home can significantly benefit family dynamics, enhancing employees' and their family members' emotional and psychological well-being (Bernuzzi et al., 2022).

Organizations that successfully mitigate toxic leadership witness numerous benefits, including a more robust, positive organizational culture. Such cultures are characterized by increased employee retention, reduced absenteeism, and lower turnover, which are crucial for long-term organizational success. Companies known for positive work environments are also more attractive to potential employees. They will likely be more innovative as employees feel safer sharing ideas and engaging in creative processes (Nielsen et al., 2020). As businesses commit to ethical leadership, they influence industry standards and shape public policies that protect workers from toxic leadership behaviors.

Advocacy can facilitate the creation of robust employment laws and regulations that promote fair and just treatment of employees, setting a precedent that could transform leadership practices across various sectors (Ahmed & Ishfaq, 2024).

The empirical examination of interventions designed to mitigate toxic leadership is crucial for validating the effectiveness of proposed strategies and understanding their broader applicability across different organizational contexts. Recent studies have begun to quantify the impact of leadership development programs designed to mitigate toxicity by enhancing leaders' self-awareness and ethical decision-making skills (Banks et al., 2018). Future research should continue this work by systematically evaluating which interventions discussed across the research are most effective across different types of organizations and cultures, including evaluating training programs that enhance leaders' emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and self-awareness. The implications for positive social change include the potential for organizational leaders to address toxic leadership behaviors, mitigate organizational toxicity, and foster healthy cultures that enhance employee well-being and societal norms for sustainable success in an ever-evolving business landscape.

Conclusions

This study explored the multifaceted nature of toxic leadership within organizations and presented effective strategies for its identification, management, and mitigation. The insights derived from this study, supported by an extensive literature review, have illuminated the profound impacts that toxic leadership can have on individual, organizational, and societal levels. Through a collaborative and iterative

process, experts in organizational behavior have reached a consensus on the most effective approaches to counteract the pervasive issue of toxic leadership.

The core of this study underscores the imperative for organizations to foster environments that discourage toxic behaviors and actively promote ethical leadership and positive workplace cultures. The recommendations offer a roadmap for organizations to implement practical and evidence-based strategies that can transform toxic leadership dynamics into opportunities for growth and improvement. These strategies include developing comprehensive leadership development programs, implementing robust feedback mechanisms, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.

Moreover, this research contributes to the broader discourse on leadership and organizational behavior by highlighting the importance of systemic change. It calls for all organizational stakeholders' ongoing commitment to continuously improve practices reinforcing ethical behavior and employee respect. In closing, this study reaffirms the critical role of leadership in shaping organizational culture. This study emphasizes the collective responsibility of leaders and employees to strive for a workplace where integrity, respect, and fairness are not just aspirational goals but everyday realities. By addressing toxic leadership effectively, organizations can enhance their health, improve employee well-being, and create a more sustainable and productive work environment.

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Appendix A: First Round Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. For questions 2-8, please provide a minimum of five recommendations for each question. Your feedback is important to the success of this study. Your answers will be completely confidential, and by completing this survey, you will make a material contribution to formulating consensus on a set of strategies specifically designed to mitigate the effects of organizational toxicity.

1. Based on your personal and professional experience, are you able to recognize the signs and symptoms of organizational toxicity?

Very likely, Likely, Neither likely nor unlikely, Unlikely, and Very unlikely

2. What are the keywords or phrases that best describe unique behaviors and traits that you have recognized as attributed to toxic leaders?

Behaviors _____ Traits _____

Behaviors _____ Traits _____

Behaviors _____ Traits _____

Behaviors _____ Traits _____

Behaviors _____ Traits _____

3. Please identify and list the signs/symptoms of an organization that is affected by toxic leaders.

4. How should organizations plan to prevent hiring toxic leaders?

5. What plans should organizations have in place that can be used specifically to identify a toxic leader?

6. Describe how organizations should plan to reverse the effects of toxic leaders.

7. Describe how organizations can implement these methods that are effective for mitigating the effects of toxic leaders.

8. Please identify and list the signs/symptoms of an organization that is infected with toxicity.

9. Describe the skills of leaders that are effective in preventing, mitigating, and resolving organizational toxicity.

10. Describe what methods are effective in preventing, mitigating, and resolving organizational toxicity.

11. Describe how organizations can implement methods that show effectiveness in preventing, mitigating, and resolving organizational toxicity.

Appendix B: Second Round Questionnaire

Welcome to Round II of this Delphi study on organizational toxicity and leadership. During Round I, participants were asked to respond to ten open-ended questions to determine their perceptions of toxic leaders and organizational toxicity. During Round II, you will be asked nine questions to evaluate the acceptability of the group responses from Round I by indicating your level of agreement or effectiveness. This Round II questionnaire study will involve you completing the following steps:

1. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. To what extent do you agree with the following keywords or phrases that best describe unique behaviors and personality traits attributed to toxic leaders? Please rate each item on a scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”
2. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
3. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following signs/symptoms that an organization is affected by toxic leaders. Please rate each item on a scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”
4. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
5. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please rate the effectiveness of the following steps that organizations can use to avoid hiring toxic leaders. Please indicate your level of agreement with each item on a scale from “Not Effective” to “Highly Effective.”
6. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
7. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please rate the effectiveness of the following steps that organizations can use to identify toxic leaders. Please indicate your level of agreement with each item on a scale from “Not Effective” to “Highly Effective.”
8. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
9. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please rate the effectiveness of the following steps that organizations can implement to reverse the effects of toxic leaders. Please indicate your level of agreement with each item on a scale from “Not Effective” to “Highly Effective.”
10. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.

11. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please indicate the level of effectiveness of the following strategies for mitigating the effects of organizational toxicity. Please indicate your level of agreement with each item on a scale from “Not Effective” to “Highly Effective.”
12. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
13. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please indicate the extent to which the following keywords or phrases effectively describe signs/symptoms of an organization affected by toxicity. Please rate each item on a scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”
14. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
15. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please indicate the extent to which each statement regarding leadership skills is most effective in preventing, mitigating, and resolving organizational toxicity. Please indicate your level of agreement with each item on a scale from “Not Effective” to “Highly Effective.”
16. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.
17. The items below were identified by study participants during the Round I survey. Please rate the effectiveness of the steps organizations can implement to prevent, mitigate, and resolve organizational toxicity. Please indicate your level of agreement with each item on a scale from “Not Effective” to “Highly Effective.”
18. Please provide any crucial terms you believe I may have omitted.

Appendix C: Third Round Questionnaire

Survey Instructions

Welcome to the Round III of this Delphi study on organizational toxicity and leadership. The strategies below represent those from Round II, where participants were rated for effectiveness with a mean score of 4 or more and an IQR of 1 or less. Your insights in the previous rounds have been invaluable, and I now invite you to participate in this crucial phase of the research. The aim of this survey is to rank various strategies based on their effectiveness in addressing toxic leadership and fostering a positive organizational environment. Your expertise will help highlight the most impactful measures.

How to Complete the Survey:

- **Read Carefully:** Each section of the survey presents a distinct aspect of dealing with toxic leadership - identifying toxic leaders, managing their effects, and mitigating and preventing organizational toxicity. Each section contains a list of strategies or characteristics that have been identified as significant based on input in Round II.
- **Ranking:** For each section, you are asked to rank the items presented from the most important (1) to the least important. The ranking should be based on your professional judgment regarding the effectiveness of each strategy in combating the challenges posed by toxic leadership and organizational toxicity.
- **Consideration:** While ranking, consider the feasibility, impact, and practicality of implementing each strategy within an organizational context. A strategy is deemed important if it can significantly contribute to reducing or eliminating the negative effects of toxic leadership and promoting a healthy work environment.

1. Identifying Toxic Leaders

In this section, please rank the strategies that you believe are most effective for identifying toxic leaders within an organization. Consider the unique behaviors, personality traits, and signs/symptoms that indicate the presence of a toxic leader. Rank each strategy from most important (1) to least important, based on their potential to help organizations recognize toxic leaders early.

Behaviors and Traits of Toxic Leaders:

- Abuse of Power and Control
- Lack of Empathy and Emotional Intelligence
- Aggressive and Intimidating Behavior
- Dishonesty and Manipulation
- Negative Emotional Responses and Instability

- Poor Interpersonal Skills and Team Dynamics
- Ineffective Leadership and Management Practices
- Insecurity and Defensive Behavior

Signs of Organizational Impact by Toxic Leaders:

- Negative Work Environment
- High Employee Turnover and Dissatisfaction
- Psychological and Emotional Stress
- Unethical Behaviors and Practices
- Lack of Communication and Transparency
- Lack of Trust and Accountability
- Retaliation and Fear of Reprisal
- Favoritism and Unfair Practices
- Individualistic and Selfish Behaviors
- Lack of Feedback and Support Systems
- Poor Management Practices

Policies for Identifying Toxic Leaders:

- Feedback Mechanisms and Investigations
- Open Communication
- Policy Enforcement and Compliance
- Protective Measures for Whistleblowers
- Revising Recruitment Strategies
- Organizational Checks and Oversight

2. Managing Toxic Leaders

This section focuses on the strategies effective in managing and reversing the effects of toxic leadership. Rank the strategies from most to least important based on their effectiveness in addressing the issues caused by toxic leaders.

Strategies for Managing Toxic Leaders:

- Addressing and Removing Toxic Leaders
- Promoting Equity and Professionalism
- Leadership Development and Support
- Acknowledgment and Support for Affected Employees
- Increasing Leader Accountability
- Fostering Open Communication
- Creating a Positive Organizational Culture

3. Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity

This section focuses on the strategies that aid in mitigating and preventing organizational toxicity as a whole. Rank these strategies from most crucial (1) to least crucial in fostering a healthy, productive organizational environment.

Methods for Mitigating Effects of Toxic Leaders:

- Addressing Toxicity and Accountability
- Communication and Employee Respect
- Development and Training
- Leadership Identification and Selection
- Promoting Teamwork and Collaboration
- Employee Empowerment
- Proactive Measures and Preventive Strategies

Identification of Organizational Toxicity:

- Negative Work Environment and Leadership Perception
- Interpersonal Issues and Destructive Behavior
- High Turnover and Staffing Issues
- Lack of Cohesion and Teamwork
- Micromanagement and Control Issues
- Workplace Stress and Employee Well-being
- Communication and Transparency Problems
- Performance and Work Quality Concerns
- Favoritism and Unfair Practices
- Cultural and Diversity Issues
- Fear and Retribution

Skills and Methods for Preventing Toxicity:

- Empathy and Emotional Intelligence
- Openness and Receptiveness
- Communication Skills
- Respect and Trust
- Accountability and Responsibility
- Recognition and Appreciation
- Transparency
- Engagement and Collaboration
- Leadership Qualities and Role Modeling
- Personal Traits and Intelligence
- Direct Actions Against Toxicity
- Development and Training
- Communication and Engagement

- Leadership Quality and Selection
- Organizational Culture and Respect

Appendix D: Fourth Round Questionnaire

Survey Instructions

Welcome to Round IV of this Delphi study on organizational toxicity and leadership. The strategies/factors listed below were derived from Round III, where participants ranked them based on their perceived importance. Your insights from the previous rounds have been invaluable, and now you are invited to participate in this critical phase of the research. The objective of this survey is to review the rankings of these strategies, provide your level of agreement with the current rankings, and explain the reasoning behind your responses.

1. Identifying Toxic Leaders: Behaviors and Traits of Toxic Leaders

- Abuse of Power and Control
- Aggressive and Intimidating Behavior
- Lack of Empathy and Emotional Intelligence
- Dishonesty and Manipulation
- Ineffective Leadership and Management Practices
- Negative Emotional Responses and Instability
- Poor Interpersonal Skills and Team Dynamics
- Insecurity and Defensive Behavior
- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why:

2. Identifying Toxic Leaders: Signs of Organizational Impact by Toxic Leaders

1. High Employee Turnover and Dissatisfaction
 2. Negative Work Environment
 3. Unethical Behaviors and Practices
 4. Psychological and Emotional Stress
 5. Poor Management Practices
 6. Lack of Trust and Accountability
 7. Lack of Communication and Transparency
 8. Retaliation and Fear of Reprisal
 9. Individualistic and Selfish Behaviors
 10. Favoritism and Unfair Practices
 11. Lack of Feedback and Support Systems
- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why:
3. Identifying Toxic Leaders: Policies for Identifying Toxic Leaders
 1. Open Communication
 2. Organizational Checks and Oversight
 3. Feedback Mechanisms and Investigations
 4. Policy Enforcement and Compliance
 5. Protective Measures for Whistleblowers
 6. Revising Recruitment Strategies

- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why:

4. Strategies for Managing Toxic Leaders
 1. Addressing and Removing Toxic Leaders
 2. Acknowledgment and Support for Affected Employees
 3. Promoting Equity and Professionalism
 4. Creating a Positive Organizational Culture
 5. Leadership Development and Support
 6. Increasing Leader Accountability
 7. Fostering Open Communication

- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why:

5. Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Methods for Mitigating Effects of Toxic Leaders
 1. Addressing Toxicity and Accountability
 2. Communication and Employee Respect
 3. Leadership Identification and Selection
 4. Employee Empowerment
 5. Development and Training
 6. Proactive Measures and Preventive Strategies
 7. Promoting Teamwork and Collaboration

- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why:

6. Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Identification of Organizational Toxicity

1. Negative Work Environment and Leadership Perception
2. Interpersonal Issues and Destructive Behavior
3. High Turnover and Staffing Issues
4. Micromanagement and Control Issues
5. Communication and Transparency Problems
6. Workplace Stress and Employee Well-being
7. Lack of Cohesion and Teamwork
8. Performance and Work Quality Concerns
9. Fear and Retribution
10. Favoritism and Unfair Practices
11. Cultural and Diversity Issues

- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why:

7. Mitigating and Preventing Organizational Toxicity: Skills and Methods for Preventing Toxicity

1. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence
2. Respect and Trust
3. Openness and Receptiveness
4. Communication Skills
5. Accountability and Responsibility
6. Transparency
7. Organizational Culture and Respect
8. Leadership Quality and Selection
9. Leadership Qualities and Role Modeling
10. Communication and Engagement
11. Direct Actions Against Toxicity

- 12. Recognition and Appreciation
- 13. Engagement and Collaboration
- 14. Development and Training
- 15. Personal Traits and Intelligence

- Agree or disagree

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○

- Please specify why: