

## **OVERCOMING TOXIC WORK ENVIRONMENT THROUGH EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Organizational culture and climate play a crucial role in employees' productivity, as their performance is determined by the nature of the work environment in which they operate. This paper explored effective leadership strategies as a means of overcoming toxic work behaviour in a work environment. When an organization has a toxic work environment devoid of psychological safety, open communication, innovation, trust, and motivation, that organization is bound to have a high turnover rate and low productivity. Toxic work environments are common in Nigeria and are an increasing concern for workers in many different sectors. Toxicity within organizations can appear in different forms, including toxic leadership, supervisors, employees, and a toxic organizational culture. Effective leadership creates a safe and healthy work environment by establishing and reinforcing norms, policies, and practices and prioritizing employees' health, well-being, and safety. The researcher clearly indicated that how safe and supportive a work environment could be is a function of an effective leadership strategy and employee voice. The paper concludes that through effective leadership strategies, toxic work behaviour can be managed and organizations can enhance the well-being of their employees and increase productivity and success.

**Keywords:** Toxic Work Environment, Effective Leadership, Employee Voice.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

An organizational culture and climate play a crucial role in the productivity of employees. The effective performance of employees is determined by the nature of the work environment in which they operate (Brenner, 2004). When an organization has a toxic work environment devoid of psychological safety, open communication, innovation, trust, and motivation, that organization is bound to have a high turnover rate coupled with low productivity, which are signs of leadership and business failure. The achievement of an organization's objectives and vision is contingent upon the performance of its employees, creativity, innovation, and valuable contributions (Joseph & Shetty, 2022). As such, organizations must strive to have a non-toxic work environment where workers are happy and motivated and contribute immensely to achieving the organization's goals. The ability of a leader to make sure that the organizational culture is friendly and non-toxic will determine whether a business will succeed or fail in the long run. Leadership in controlling working conditions is crucial for organizations seeking to attract, retain, and effectively utilize the highest quality workers (Whitener et al., 1998). Therefore, the ability to overcome toxic behaviours in a work environment is the function of the leadership, management, and HR departments, which directly deal with the employees.

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According to Rasool et al. (2021), in a toxic work environment, employees are subjected to cruel and violent treatment, putting their health and safety at risk. Toxic work environments may have major consequences for the lives and careers of employees. Depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder are some of the mental and physical health issues and outcomes. Work environments characterized by toxicity can result in high absenteeism rates, increased turnover, and lower productivity. Moreover, a toxic work environment might negatively impact an employee's professional advancement (George, 2023). Harassment, intimidation, and ostracism are all elements that contribute to a hostile work climate and constitute toxic work environments. Favouritism is common in toxic environments, where one person is given preferential treatment over others. This can result in discriminatory treatment, a lack of recognition, and unclear prospects for professional progression. In addition, employees who openly oppose the toxic environment may encounter backlash, impeding their career advancement. In a toxic work environment, physical and mental imbalances are common, which is concerning because of the underlying causes of high levels of stress and burnout and the resulting strain on employees' health (Rusdiyanto, 2022). Toxicity within an organization is represented by the accumulation of intense negative emotions in employees, which can make them disconnect from their work and interrupt communication with other colleagues, negatively affecting their well-being and work performance (Botez & Cotet, 2021). In this context, employee well-being refers to the sense of protection and satisfaction people feel due to their jobs (Rusdiyanto, 2022). When exposed to toxic work environments, it can be difficult for employees to achieve a good work-life balance. Thus, a toxic work environment may have a negative impact on well-being since it undermines people's feelings of safety.

Opperman (2002) states that various elements, both internal and external to the organization, impact employees' ability to carry out their job duties. These factors include regulations, rules, culture, resources, working relationships, and the physical location of the workplace. According to Noble (2009), there has to be a greater focus on recognizing and addressing the work environment, as employees can experience prolonged stress due to poor perceptions of their workplace. Effective organizational functioning requires a safe work environment and employee participation in voice behaviors (Morrison, 2011). Organizational and employee well-being are enhanced when employees freely express their thoughts, suggestions, concerns, or opinions regarding work-related matters to enhance organizational functioning (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010). Employees' ability to speak up depends on how organizational leadership permits and encourages the voice in organizations (Umar & Hassan, 2013). In Nigeria, the prevailing corporate cultures tend to discourage open communication, and leaders often question employees who express differing opinions, leading them to feel undervalued and lacking autonomy in their jobs (Dickson & Isaiah, 2023). Toxic work environments are common in Nigeria and are an increasing concern for workers in many different sectors. Toxicity within organizations can appear in different forms, including toxic leadership, supervisors, employees, and a toxic organizational culture. Therefore, this research examines how safe and supportive work environments can be created through effective leadership strategies and employee voice. Through this approach, organizations can enhance the well-being of their employees and increase productivity and success.

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## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Effective Leadership**

Effective leadership is more crucial than ever in the current environment, characterized by huge expectations and rapid change. Effective leadership skills will have a positive impact on the work environment. Today's leaders must establish and maintain responsive interpersonal connections with employees, effectively communicate verbally and in written form, build outstanding teams, and collaborate efficiently with leaders from other organizations (Goleman, 2007). Effective leadership plays a crucial role in creating a safe work environment by establishing and reinforcing norms, policies, and practices that prioritize employees' health, well-being, and safety. Effective leadership is the ability of a leader to influence employees and followers in the right direction while using organizational resources, strategy, and processes to achieve organizational goals and mission promptly. Kouzes and Posner (2002) noted that for leaders to be effective, they must lead by example and demonstrate the principles they hope to create or sustain in the organization. Leaders set the tone for a non-toxic work environment through their actions and behaviours. Effective leadership often involves a combination of styles tailored to the organization's needs. Effective leadership styles must adapt to external circumstances and the dynamic work environment, necessitating varied approaches depending on the situation (Sivaruban, 2021). Consequently, effective leaders can choose a leadership style suitable to the specific work environment.

Leadership is a managerial function that focuses on people and their social interactions to influence them to accomplish the organization's objectives (Antonakis & Day, 2018). According to Massarik (2013), leadership is having interpersonal influence in a particular situation, using communication to guide towards achieving specific goals. Leadership is an activity carried out to influence, mobilize, and equip others to achieve organizational goals through interaction, communication, and cooperation. Respect, honesty, a growth mindset, sound judgment, an aptitude for instructing and listening, business acumen, and the capacity to motivate others are all qualities that should be present in a leader (Vitulli, 2008). Today, organizations recognize leadership capacity as a business function to remain competitive and recognize that successful organizations need effective leaders (Wallace et al., 2021). One of the reasons for this is that, among other things, successful business operations require effective leaders. Effective leadership unites the employees in a shared vision, delivering trust, integrity, and value, which can improve an organization.

According to Bennis (1989), effective leaders provide direction and meaning to the people they lead, generate trust, favour action and risk-taking, and are purveyors of hope. Leaders need to understand the complexity of organizations, their working environments, and the relationship between their work and the needs of their followers to be effective. Evidence suggests that no single behaviour will lead to successful leadership; however, a range of behaviours found in effective leaders include strong communication skills, commitment, adaptability, motivation, efficiency, results-focusedness, establishing plans, building relationships, developing oneself, analyzing problems, being a strategic thinker, fostering teamwork, innovating, and managing conflict (Kimmelman, 2010). Leaders are responsible for sustaining morale and making workers feel appreciated and productive (Charan, 2008). Therefore, according to Juras (2010), leaders must

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have unique and well-honed characteristics, competencies, and the right leadership styles to steer their organizations through challenging times.

## **2.2 Work Environment**

According to Kohun (1992), an employee's working environment consists of all the actions, behaviours, and other important variables influencing the employee's job. The work environment includes an organization's daily productivity and efficacy, including the manner, location, and task completion time. It comprises all the necessary components for completing that work (Jena, 2016). An organization can attract and retain personnel and facilitate optimal performance by fostering a work environment conducive to well-being and support. According to Brenner (2004), organizations' ability to share knowledge depends on how well their work environments are optimized to use these valuable resources, enabling employees to capitalize on collective knowledge and improve organizational efficiency. The technical, human, and organizational factors are the three primary divisions Opperman (2002) classifies the working environment. A wide range of factors within the workplace, including employee well-being, interpersonal connections with colleagues, productivity, and collaborative efforts, can significantly impact an individual's health and satisfaction (Awan, 2015).

Kyko (2005) proposed that work environments can be classified into two distinct types: toxic and conducive. A conducive work environment provides employees a pleasant experience, allows them to utilize their skills and behaviour fully, and promotes self-actualizing behaviour. For example, within a conducive work environment, an employee who was previously negligent transforms into one who is accountable. In Kyko's (2005) study, it was found that working in a toxic environment leads to negative experiences and causes employees to behave in ways that are not aligned with their true potential. It strengthens habits that hinder self-actualization and contributes to the emergence of negative qualities in employees' behaviour. As a survival mechanism, responsible and reasonable employees could turn into irrational and negligent coworkers in a toxic work environment (Kyko, 2005). Employees who work in a positive and organized work environment are self-assured in their tasks and do not feel overwhelmed by excessive demands. They can maintain a healthy work-life balance and prioritize their non-work commitments while achieving their work goals (Nátalia Stalmašeková, 2017). They have a strong emotional connection to their work, evident in their energy and pleasant feelings. They have a sense of well-being and enthusiasm while performing it. These individuals maintain a healthy equilibrium between their professional and personal lives. They have a sense of empathy and possess a strong alignment between their skills and job demands. Organizational culture could be another significant toxic trait of any organization; for instance, it may prioritize results to achieve its objectives at the expense of workforce retention, satisfaction at work, and mental health.

## **2.3 Toxic Work Environment**

A toxic work environment refers to the extent of negative behaviours, such as discrimination, bullying, colleague aggression, or other harmful actions, that are present in a workplace, which can result in higher levels of work-related anxiety and stress (Laschinger et al., 2014). In a toxic work environment, employees are subjected to verbal, physical, or emotional abuse from teammates or leadership, resulting in hostility and conflict. A toxic workplace environment is

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characterized by the presence of selfish behaviours, aggressive and authoritative leadership, intimidating actions from leaders and colleagues, as well as instances of harassment, bullying, and alienation. A toxic office environment often leads to a noticeable disruption in both physical and mental well-being, which is worrisome since it is rooted in significant causes of stress and burnout and negatively impacts the psychological health of employees (Rasool et al., 2021). Organizational toxicity arises from various organizational factors, including organizational changes, policies, traumas, crises, intrusions, and incompetence in upholding institutional objectives and values. It can also be fueled by negative comments related to gender or race, verbal or physical threats, employee absenteeism, poor communication, increased gossip and rumours, personal conflicts, power struggles, abusive leadership, an undesirable organizational climate, a hierarchical structure, unfair reward systems, abuse of power, heavy workloads, and a lack of work-life balance (Kasalak, 2019). Work-related stress induces unproductive behaviour and undermines the effectiveness of the organization.

In addition, according to McIntyre (2014), negativity spreads like a virus through organizations if someone's verbal or nonverbal behaviour makes others feel sad, nervous, discouraged, or hopeless. Also, "uncivil and aggressive workplace behaviours" have emerged due to downsizing, reengineering, budget cuts, demands for more productivity, authoritarian work settings, and the use of temporary employees (Frost & Robinson, 1999). Toxic work environments can be caused by problematic personality qualities, career setbacks, unwillingness to change, and the actions of leadership (McIntyre, 2014). A toxic work culture is characterized by harmful behaviours, unhealthy norms, and a lack of support, which erode trust, undermine collaboration, and create an environment of fear and insecurity. Researchers face difficulties documenting and analyzing such incidents since victims of a toxic work environment tend to avoid discussing and remain silent about their experiences (Adeoye et al., 2020; Berquist et al., 2018). This silence reinforces the toxic behaviour or practices already present in the workplace. Moreover, a toxic work environment significantly negatively influences psychological safety within an organization. There is a direct correlation between a hazardous work environment and a lack of psychological safety in the workplace. Stress, anxiety, sadness, and other mental health problems can result from being constantly exposed to harmful behaviours and not having a safe psychological environment (Søvold et al., 2021). Employees' mental and physical health suffers in a highly toxic work environment, leading to stress and an inability to focus on tasks; as a result, productivity drops, and the organization falls short of its objectives.

Additionally, according to Frost (2003), toxic work settings were characterized by a combination of formality, friendliness, distance, and politeness among colleagues, suggesting that civility still played a dominant role. Pulling people down, being a passive-aggressive leader, spreading rumours that hurt others, playing dirty politics, and being negative are all examples of toxic behaviours (Anderson, 2013). Aggression, narcissism, insincerity, and passivity are the four toxic behaviours identified by Brightman (2013). Other components of a toxic work environment include rudeness, high-stress levels, a lack of trust, and the spread of negative emotions (Gilbert et al., 2012). According to Lawrence (2014), in situations where a manager is recognized for engaging in bullying behaviours (such as sexual harassment, practical jokes, frequent targeting of the same individual, public humiliation, and intimidation), employees often gang up against each



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other due to the absence of consequences for inappropriate conduct. Also, managers and employees often claimed credit for the achievements of others, engaged in office rumours and unfounded accusations, and frequently fabricated stories and false accusations. According to Siegel (2011), toxic behaviours can take the form of abusive supervision and bullying. Instances of bullying encompass actions such as publicly humiliating subordinates, unjustly claiming credit for their initiatives, displaying contempt, and exhibiting explosive rage. As Kasalak (2019) pointed out, it can be more difficult to manage HR activities in a hostile work environment or to resolve employee disputes when the work environment is toxic.

Toxic leadership, pervasive culture, poor communication, corporate silence, bullying and harassing tactics, and extreme fatigue causing unforeseen problems at work are all potential causes of a toxic work environment. According to Rasool et al. (2021), harassment, bullying, and ostracism are the main causes of toxic work environments. Harassment in the workplace encompasses a wide range of actions that, according to the code of ethics, are unacceptable and should not be tolerated. Sexually explicit gestures, improper physical actions, and sexually suggestive language are all examples of workplace harassment (Al-Somaidae et al., 2023). Workplace bullying consists of repeated and unjustified acts of violence, behaviour, or conduct between employees. Work-related bullying behaviours include giving unachievable tasks, impossible deadlines, unmanageable workloads, meaningless tasks or supplying unclear information, threats, and unjustified criticism (Beswick et al., 2006). Employee ostracism refers to an employee's unfair treatment, including exclusion, isolation, limited task assignments, and minimal involvement in important work matters. This treatment leads to the employee feeling isolated and experiencing reduced job satisfaction (Al-Somaidae et al., 2023). It may include the deliberate or unintended disregard of the employee, particularly in relation to social gatherings, work conferences, and the discussion of key objectives and tasks, including matters of strategic importance (Chang et al., 2021). Ostracism at the workplace also declines positive behaviour and social communication in ostracized employees, which will enhance aggressive behaviour, which has a bad impact on social interaction and thus can negatively affect employees' job performance.

Research indicates that the societal culture in which organizations function influences the organizational culture. As Hofstede (2001) points out, value-belief theory posits that the extent to which people, groups, and institutions within a culture act is impacted by the values and beliefs held by its members. According to the cultural immersion theory, most people stay in the cultural milieu where they were born and raised. They may forget that other cultures have distinct ways of seeing and experiencing the world because they get absorbed in their culture (Dickson et al. 2004). Hence, societal qualities have the potential to shape the attributes of organizations operating within a larger society. The Nigerian culture tends to have a hierarchical social structure and often strongly emphasizes respect for authority figures, which is also reflected in many organizations (Umar & Hassan, 2013). This norm may make employees hesitate to speak up or challenge decisions made by those in higher positions. According to Hayes and Prakasam (1989), organizations in nations with a high power distance tend to choose more authoritative and less collaborative relationships. The choice of not voicing concerns at the workplace is influenced by the organization's hierarchical structure, where superiors who are unwilling to hear about issues can penalize individuals for expressing their opinions, and this decision is shaped by the social

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norms that exist within the system, which implicitly discourage speaking up (Milliken et al., 2003). The common belief that the leader knows better and subordinates expect to be told what to do emanates from the cultural environment of operation that limits the voice behaviours of employees and forces them to adopt silence as a norm (Umar & Hassan, 2013).

In Nigerian culture, vulnerability among peers is regarded as cowardice, and expressing worries about colleagues is seen as hypocrisy, sycophancy, and maliciousness, which is why most employees avoid speaking out about team members or project-related issues (Adeoye et al., 2020). In collectivist cultural contexts, individuals prioritize maintaining positive relationships with colleagues over expressing dissenting opinions or pointing out potential issues (Zhang & Wei, 2017). This emphasis on group harmony can discourage employees from speaking up, even if it might be in the organization's best interest. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Nigeria published the 2017 annual report of the World Economic Forum (WEF), which found that eighty percent of employees refrain from making contributions to workplace development initiatives for fear of criticism or victimization (UNDP, 2017). Therefore, the lack of concern among workers regarding the challenges faced by organizations across Africa is alarming, as employees consider their workplace unsuitable for innovation and research (Adeoye et al. 2020).

Consequently, in today's work environment in Nigeria, where unemployment is predominant, employees deem it fit to tolerate leadership by silence rather than embark on turnover. Employees' perception of psychological safety greatly influences their willingness to speak up. When employees know the potential consequences of expressing their opinions, they may hesitate to share their constructive viewpoints out of fear of experiencing negative personal and interpersonal consequences (Pacheco et al. 2015). In some organizations, there might be a culture of fear, where employees fear retaliation or negative consequences for speaking up or reporting issues (Dania & Inegbenebor, 2019). This fear could be driven by the lack of protection for whistleblowers or a history of punitive actions against those who raise concerns, which can create a climate of silence within the organization. Goldsmith (2002) believes that "fear affects productivity, communication, creativity, and emotional well-being." A toxic work environment fueled by organizational silence results in poor decision-making. It stifles innovation within the organization because a culture of silence limits opportunities for growth and improvement and can hinder the organization's ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Fast et al., 2014).

According to Field (2014), prolonged negativity in work environments can lead to toxicity. Both workers and leaders may encounter conflicts arising from unfulfilled expectations, which can result in a negative environment. Certain issues or frustrations are inevitable when people from diverse backgrounds share the same environment and interactions, such as in the workplace (Jain & Kaur, 2014). Leaders can prevent toxic work environments by promptly and effectively addressing such negativity (Day et al., 2014). When leaders fail to handle a specific issue promptly or effectively, it increases the likelihood that employees may engage in negative attitudes, gossiping, and other harmful behaviours. The cycle of toxicity will be further perpetuated as this negativity spreads and more individuals become susceptible to bad behaviours and attitudes (Burns, 2017; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). Leaders can use constructive leadership styles and practices to reduce the likelihood of toxic work environments and their effects on employees'

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health and productivity, such as by establishing clear and productive problem-solving processes (Field, 2014).

## **2.4 Toxic Leadership**

Today's organizations operate within a complex and fiercely competitive marketplace, where the leader's conduct can determine the success or failure of the organization (Saqib and Arif, 2017). Securing enduring paths to organizational success requires thoughtful attention to toxic behaviors in the work environment. Adeoye et al. (2020) found that toxic leadership and unpleasant work settings are common ways toxicity manifests in many workplaces. Toxic leadership forces most workers to adopt an extraordinarily agreeable, silent personality. Leaders' toxic behaviour is seen as harmful to the organization's effectiveness. According to Mehta and Maheshwari (2014), toxic leadership occurs when leaders employ destructive and self-serving behaviours and traits like bullying, intimidation, manipulation, or explicit subversive aggression to control their employees. When considering issues of toxins in the workplace, toxic leaders must be considered first. This is because leadership sets the tone for the organization's culture and sets the example for employees to follow (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013). When leaders exhibit toxic conduct, such as engaging in unethical practices or displaying favouritism towards certain employees while mistreating others, particularly vulnerable followers will imitate these actions (Baronce, 2015; Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013). As a result, employees who choose not to engage in unethical conduct may disengage from the organization or risk victimization by the followers and leaders who encourage such conduct (Hayes et al., 2015; Jha & Jha, 2015).

Studies have shown that toxic leadership can lead to several negative outcomes, including employee dissatisfaction, lack of commitment, depression, anxiety, burnout, low self-esteem, emotional exhaustion, and silence (Brinsfield, Edwards, & Greenberg, 2009; Webster, Beehr, & Love, 2011; Tepper, 2000; Xu, Loi, & Lam, 2015). Toxic leaders damage team morale, weaken unity within the team, generate needless stress in the workplace, promote destructive ideals, and sow seeds of despair (Elle, 2012). Also, as a result of abusive leadership actions, employees experience emotional exhaustion and often remain silent (Xu et al., 2015). An indicator of effective problem management within an organization is when employees feel comfortable expressing their concerns by speaking up. Establishing a safe environment where employees feel comfortable voicing their concerns is an important responsibility for leaders. Voice is an important part of the leader-member interaction in the workplace (Liang & Yeh, 2019). When leaders are narcissistic, have a negative impact on their followers, and foster an environment of distrust, followers feel silenced (Gao et al., 2011).

According to Schmidt (2008), there are five characteristics of toxic leadership: narcissism, authoritarianism, self-promotion, abusive supervision, and unpredictability. Self-promotion advertises their accomplishments, takes credit for others' work, blames others, and deflects responsibility for mistakes (Dobbs, 2014; Schmidt, 2014). Abusive supervision relates to the leader's deliberately antagonistic actions towards employees, which do not involve physical violence (Dobbs, 2014; Schmidt, 2014; Tepper, 2007). Unpredictable leaders, through their actions, keep subordinates afraid and watchful. When their superiors are around, these leaders change their behaviour, and their subordinates eventually give up trying to keep themselves safe



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because of their unexpected and often harmful conduct (Dobbs, 2014; Schmidt, 2008). Narcissism is characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance and an inability to control one's impulses, manifesting in an individual's noncompliance with established business policy (Dobbs 2014; Schmidt 2014). Dobbs (2014) and Schmidt (2014) argue that authoritarian leadership styles aim to exert excessive control and authority over subordinates, with the ultimate goal of having the leaders control all the work.

Goldman (2006) argues that when a leader displays negative and disruptive behaviour, their subordinates are likely to follow suit, creating a toxic climate in the work environment. Studies indicate that toxic leadership behaviours impact employees' mental health in negative ways. These effects include increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, harm to employees' well-being, decreased effectiveness on the job, and influencing organizational outcomes (Burris et al., 2008; Erickson et al., 2015; Krasikova et al., 2013; Bhandarker & Rai, 2019; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper, 2007; Xu et al., 2015). When leaders are toxic, they create a hostile work environment, which makes employees nervous and cautious (Joseph & Shetty, 2022). Maintaining silence in such situations is a usual approach for subordinates to safeguard their positions and avoid being seen as inconsiderate (Morrison, 2011; Khalid & Ahmed, 2016; Wu et al., 2018). The traits of a toxic leader include a lack of concern for the mental and physical health of their employees as well as overbearing, selfishness, rigidity, and bullying (Lubit, 2004; Reed & Bullis, 2009). According to Naeem and Khurram (2020), toxic leaders can be described as those who cause psychological problems for their employees. This distress leads to negative feelings, affecting their work engagement. An organization's commitment, satisfaction, and fairness are all negatively impacted by toxic leaders, increasing turnover intentions (Naeem & Khurram, 2020).

Furthermore, toxic leaders are considered to violate the fundamental principle of social exchange theory (SET), which is mutual benefit among individuals through their self-centred, self-interested, and controlling conduct, which may ultimately result in staff turnover (Cook et al., 2013). According to Kusy and Holloway (2009), toxic leaders have a devastating impact on the well-being of the organization and its employees, who diligently strive for success. Therefore, organizations must understand leadership behaviours to identify a leader's toxic tendencies before they escalate into a major negative influence.

Toxic leadership may emerge inadvertently or due to well-intended motives (Cotton, 2016; Fraher, 2016). When leaders step into a failing department, they may want to fix things quickly by applying their expertise; alternatively, they may be working in a high-pressure environment that demands quick decisions, which can cause them to rely on their abilities before involving their employees (Cotton, 2016; Fraher, 2016). Even though the toxic leader means well, they end up undermining their employees in an effort to help (Fraher, 2016). There can be a vicious cycle of toxic behaviour in the work environment if undermining continues for an extended period, making workers resentful or even withdrawing (Fischbacher-Smith, 2015; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). Senior leaders have the authority to interrupt and even prevent toxic leadership within their organizations, but they may not take action for several reasons. For example, senior leaders may not witness these behaviours directly because of their status. People who exhibit undesirable toxic behaviours often

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also possess desirable traits such as boldness and charisma, so careful impression management may camouflage toxicity.

Moreover, toxic leaders may produce desired results that benefit an organization's bottom line despite acting to further their own self-serving goals over those of the organization (Illies & Reiter-Palmon, 2008; Steele, 2011). Toxic leaders may neglect the welfare of their staff by imposing impractical and unrealistic performance expectations, which often leads to immediate benefits that enhance the toxic leader's standing, with top management unaware of the negative impact on the employees (Bereczkei, 2018). In the long term, however, toxic leadership behaviours that senior leaders allow to persist—through inattention or inaction—increase workplace deviance and the risk of an insider threat event, inflate the cost of mitigation, and hasten organizational decline (Goldman, 2008; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Tepper et al., 2009; Whicker, 1997). Leaders should make non-toxic leadership a priority in order to create safe work environments (Breevaart et al., 2014). Leaders who take over a toxic environment as a result of the negative actions of their predecessors or other contributing factors may find it necessary to implement non-toxic leadership strategies in order to rectify or counterbalance the negative inclinations of employees and the overall climate (Erickson et al., 2017).

## **2.5 Effective Leadership Strategies**

### **2.5.1 Promoting Proactive Voice Behaviours**

The 21st-century work environment is changing in response to rapid innovation, competition, and long-term sustainability, making it impossible for organizations to remain competitive with employees who merely obey orders and do not contribute to the organization through feedback mechanisms. As such, an organization's ability to adapt, manage change, and stay afloat in today's unpredictable and ever-changing business climate highly depends on proactive voice behaviours (Crant et al., 2011; Parker & Collins, 2010). Voice refers to the deliberate or official communication of ideas, opinions, suggestions, or other options to address and improve an unsatisfactory situation and the organization's overall performance (Bashshur and Oc, 2015). The use of voice significantly impacts how an organization operates, enabling new approaches for recognizing and directing leaders' focus towards resolving important problems associated with current processes. According to Van Dyne and LePine (1998), voice behaviour refers to expressing concerns to enhance organizational processes. Voice behaviour can lead to negative emotions and damage one's reputation and interpersonal connections, thus jeopardizing someone's status. (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Milliken et al., 2003). A study by Saunders et al. (1992) has shown that the more employees perceive their leaders to be responsive to their voice input, the more likely they are to engage in subsequent voice behaviour. Even though it might be challenging, leaders must let people disagree and resist the urge to use power and authority when doing so could make people feel less safe. Parker et al. (2010) stated that contextual characteristics, including work design, the role of leadership, and organizational climate, play a role in predicting proactive voice behaviour.

According to Zhu et al. (2022), bureaucratic leadership is commonly observed in developing nations. It is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and power distance rules and is frequently disguised as leadership. Conflicts may arise when employees raise concerns and

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propose alternative approaches to the existing situation within the team and the organization. This can be particularly challenging for leaders who have invested significant time and energy into building and maintaining the current framework of procedures and approaches (Aboud et al., 2023). Consequently, the employee risks being unfairly criticized for their actions and receiving a poor performance review (Morrison, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003). A culture of silence predominates in the work environment in Nigeria, as it does in most developing nations; speaking up is not considered customary. Because this is a collectivist culture, defined as "where society maintains a higher degree of interdependence among its members," workers have a hard time believing in their creative abilities, which limits their expression (Zhu et al., 2022). A high power-distance culture that accepts and reinforces an unequal power distribution between managers and employees, according to Mordi and Oruh (2017), impacts strategies aimed at empowering employees in Nigeria's petroleum sector.

In Nigeria, where traditions and established norms hold significant influence, it is essential for employees to have the opportunity to question outdated practices, offer alternative solutions, and contribute to innovation. According to Zhu et al. (2022), when employees perceive that speaking up will not have any negative consequences, they will be more likely to do so, and when they feel the opposite, they will prefer to remain silent. To encourage a wide range of perspectives, ideas, and voices in response to any organizational issue, it is critical to ensure that employees are safe from judgment from supervisors or colleagues (Newman et al. 2017). Creating a culture that values voice ultimately leads to overcoming power distance, accountability, innovation, and organizational success.

Addressing organizational silence and promoting open communication is essential to preventing the development of a toxic work environment (Farghaly & Abou Zeid, 2023). Leaders must understand and navigate the cultural dynamics to address organizational silence in Nigeria. Leaders can promote a culture of psychological safety where employees feel empowered and encouraged to speak up without fear of negative consequences (Edmonson, 1999). Building trust, providing channels for anonymous feedback, and demonstrating openness to constructive criticism can help organizations mitigate the negative impact of societal culture on organizational silence (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Leaders can help prevent a toxic workplace and create a healthy company climate by developing policies that develop employees and help them shine, build fair-minded workplaces, and create an atmosphere that allows spaces for healing (Frost, 2004). In such environments, employees speak up and contribute constructive responses to workplace challenges. Additionally, promoting a more participative and inclusive leadership style and fostering a culture of open dialogue and collaboration can help overcome cultural communication barriers and encourage employee engagement and active participation.

### **2.5.2 Managing Toxic Employees**

Employees are considered toxic if their behaviours cause harm to the organization, its employees, or its property (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). It is more expensive for an organization to have a toxic employee than an underperforming employee. According to Usman (2018), toxic employees affect the organization and influence others by draining their energy and causing frustration. Their conduct significantly impacts the entire workforce and hinders recruiting more

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suitable individuals for the firm. Toxic employees typically exhibit pessimistic attitudes, a lack of responsibility and organization, an absence of credibility, a reluctance to adapt to new responsibilities, and confrontational and excessively defensive behaviour. According to Housman and Minor (2015), toxic individuals have a negative impact on the organization's productivity. They lower morale and provoke anger among their colleagues while increasing frustration among other employees. The presence of toxic personnel has a detrimental impact on the organization due to their behaviours. Organizations can incur high costs from even mild cases of toxic behaviour, such as decreased customer loyalty, low morale among employees, higher turnover rates, and a decline in credibility with key external stakeholders (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Litzky et al., 2006; Ermongkonchai, 2010; MacLean et al., 2010). While toxic employees may be able to accomplish their own goals, Xu and Luk (2020) pointed out that their actions have a domino effect and drain morale and performance across the organization.

In order to keep the work environment healthy, dealing with toxic employees as soon as they act unacceptably is necessary. Consequently, it is important to clearly define what constitutes toxic behaviour in the work environment and identify employees with such traits to prevent a toxic work culture (Xu & Luk, 2020). Effectively managing toxic employees requires a combination of leadership approaches aimed at addressing their behaviour, protecting the overall team, and providing opportunities for positive change, including the following:

### **2.5.3 Taking immediate action**

A toxic work environment results from leadership failing to notice or blatantly ignoring warning indicators that something is wrong. According to Bugdol (2018), leaders should take swift action as they become aware of toxic employees in their organization because prompt action yields better results than delayed responses. Allowing toxicity in the work environment may ruin the professional reputations of those involved (victims and inflictors alike) or lead to the company's demise (Fred, 2022). As the organization observes a growing pattern of these unproductive behaviours, there is a risk that the organizational culture may become toxic in the near future, and prompt response is better than inaction (Xu & Luk, 2020). Moreover, it is important to develop and enforce a comprehensive company policy that clearly defines unacceptable behaviours and the consequences for engaging in them, making sure employees are aware of the policy and understand its importance. Toxic behaviour must be addressed by creating a transparent reporting system, offering victims assistance, and holding offenders accountable (George, 2023). Durniat (2014) and Bugdol (2018) agree that toxic behaviour has no place in any organization and that there must be systems for employees to report it. A well-established policy in the organization is essential to address employees' complaints and assist management in discovering problems sooner (Xu & Luk, 2020).

### **2.5.4 Understanding the Employee**

In order to create a healthy work environment, it is crucial to identify toxic employees. Personality, stress, psychological conditions, and personal challenges are among the many causes of toxic behaviour in work environments (Xu & Luk, 2020). As such, examining the toxic employee's

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behaviour and its origin is crucial to identifying the source of the problem causing them to be disruptive at work. (Gallo, 2017). The first step in addressing toxic behaviour is to identify its root cause. One effective way to do this is by asking the right questions (Gallo, 2016; Johnson, 2020). The leader may need to meet with them to inquire about their well-being at home and work and get feedback on these concerns. The manager may be able to get these workers back on track once the causes of their behaviour have been determined (Usman, 2018). Understanding the reasons behind toxic behaviours allows managers to design a suitable plan accordingly. The best course of action can be determined by looking at the root reasons; for example, if a manager notices that their employees are acting toxic due to stress, they can organize a training session to teach them how to cope with stress. The use of change drivers, including rewards and recognition, would be very beneficial if negative behaviours are induced by personality factors (Xu & Luk, 2020). Regarding psychological issues, it is best to seek professional assistance or, after consulting with HR, arrange for a leave of absence (Gallo, 2016). Also, supervisors could anticipate toxic employees' activities by learning their patterns of behaviour (Xu & Luk, 2020). Managers can also use this knowledge to prepare themselves mentally and avoid taking toxic behaviour personally when interacting with employees (Johnson, 2020).

#### **2.5.5 Effective Communication**

An efficient way to handle toxic employees is through communication, which aims to understand them and explain their unacceptable behaviour. Bugdol (2018) argues that for employees to start improving their behaviours, leaders should tell them that it is wrong and inappropriate and would help them become more self-aware of their shortcomings. When leaders ask open-ended questions and allow enough time for workers to answer, they encourage employees to voice their thoughts and provide more accurate information (Bugdol, 2018; Lilley, 2002; Pincus, 2004; Plachy, 2020). Toxic people are usually sensitive; to avoid shutting down, becoming defensive, and denying the problems, managers should focus on the impacts of the toxic behaviours in direct communication, providing detailed and concrete examples of such behaviours to prevent refutation (Xu & Luk, 2020). Toxic people do not always realize how they affect those around them. Such individuals often fail to see the bigger picture because they are too preoccupied with their actions. It is crucial to provide immediate feedback to help them understand the issue and determine how to improve (Usman, 2018). Toxic employees can be helped to modify their behaviour when they receive clear feedback on their actions and the consequences of those actions (Xu & Luk, 2020). Giving employees constructive feedback allows them to grow as individuals while creating a more harmonious work atmosphere for the organization and its employees. It is important to review performance against these guidelines regularly and provide follow-up feedback to improve their performance if they respond positively (Usman, 2018).

#### **2.5.6 Disciplinary Actions**

Discipline may be imposed by managers on toxic employees who fail to improve their behaviour or fail to show any progress beyond the designated deadline. By implementing disciplinary measures, managers can forestall the further spread of toxicity within the organization and avoid fatal issues (Xu & Luk, 2020). Before action is taken, it is important to build a strong case against



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the toxic employee, establish a pattern of behaviour, and take steps to address the warnings given, performance reports from supervisors, and the resources provided (Gallo, 2016). Ensuring comprehensive documentation is vital at every stage of the management process to effectively implement disciplinary measures and provide essential legal safeguards for the manager, the team, and the organization. Disciplinary actions may vary according to the organization's policy, code of conduct, values, or applicable laws. Such actions include termination, written and verbal warnings, or job transfers (Usman, 2018). Toxic employees negatively impact other employees as they may teach their thoughts to others, so leaders must know when to cut losses in time.

### **2.5.7 Create a Positive Work Environment**

According to Chandrasekar (2011), the work environment can significantly affect employee performance, which can have positive and negative effects. When people are respected, supported, and engaged at work, they are more likely to enjoy their jobs and have a positive attitude, making for a more productive workforce. A positive environment defines supportive peers and superiors, healthy competition, celebrating failures, and learning from success. The indoor environment significantly impacts individuals' psychological health, actions, talents, and performance because most people spend half their lives there (Dorgan, 1994). Unfortunately, most firms in developing countries like Nigeria consider a safe and positive work environment unnecessary and do not invest heavily in sustaining a positive work environment (Aghaji et al., 2021). However, promoting a positive work environment is crucial for the well-being and success of both employees and the organization. Leaders' emotional tones and expectations create a healthy, community-centred atmosphere or an unhealthy, toxic work culture. A respectful work environment directly results from leaders who show empathy for and commitment to their people (Childers, 2005). Toxic behaviours are less common in organizations that promote a healthy culture that values respect, empathy, and collaboration (George, 2023).

According to Salamon and Robinson (2008), employees' feelings of responsibility for the organization and their performance were positively connected with their perceptions of trust. An organization's ability to operate smoothly depends on the level of trust among its members. Positive effects on organizational performance results, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours are among the significant benefits of trust (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Trust is the basic tenet of all relationships, so building an environment of trust is one of the most important things you can do to create a positive work environment. How leaders treat employees has a major influence on how employees treat one another, clients, and other stakeholders (Oakley, 2004). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, leaders and managers impact the organizational climate emotionally by implementing policies, processes, and routine activities. In order to establish a work environment that is both healthy and respectful, it is necessary to shape policies, promote positive relationships, and consistently reinforce values in order to establish a culture that abhors toxic behaviour, which will require a collaborative effort. Leadership is of utmost importance in influencing the culture of an organization. Through training and development opportunities, leaders can acquire valuable skills for fostering a positive and healthy workplace (George, 2023). By collaborating to establish a positive and wholesome work environment, organizations can enhance employee well-being and productivity while decreasing the prevalence of toxins in the work environment.

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### 3. CONCLUSION

Leadership effectiveness is generally accepted and regarded as an impact on employee well-being and work place productivity. The findings indicated that toxic work environment can jeopardize employee health and safety. This signifies that leaders need strong positive will to overcome behaviour. To influence the work culture, leaders must also demonstrate to their subordinates the appropriate behaviour in their teams or the organization through an effective leadership strategy. When leaders display unethical behaviour, micro-aggressions, or favouritism, their subordinates may internalize the same characteristics or endure increased stress as a result of confronting the negative consequences. To successfully address toxic work behaviours, organizations must provide leadership development programs and diagnostic tools to identify such behaviours. Leaders must incentivize healthy leadership behaviours, such as organizational citizenry and other pro-social leadership values, in themselves and others and maintain focus on the long-term consequences of toxicity. Organizations must hold leaders accountable for fostering a positive work culture. To ease the fear of potential retaliation, leaders ought to strive to establish a work environment that values and acknowledges employees' perspectives and opinions. This can be achieved by fostering an atmosphere where such expressions are acknowledged and valued. Leaders can also foster a culture of open communication where feedback is valued, constructive criticism is welcomed, and channels are created for employees to express concerns without fear of retaliation. Leaders are responsible for promoting the organization's ideals and promptly dealing with toxic behaviours. Leaders must lead by example, modelling the behaviour they want to see in their daily interactions and their espoused corporate values. Organizations need to formulate policies and procedures preemptive to employees' exposure to toxic behaviours, regularly assess the organizational culture through surveys, focus groups, or other feedback mechanisms, and use the information gathered to adjust and improve policies and practices. Amid these juxtapositions, the researchers conclude that through effective leadership strategies, toxic work behaviour can be managed and organizations can enhance the well-being of their employees and increase productivity and success.

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