

Analyzing the Mediating Effects of Toxic Workplace Culture on Organizational Performance and Employee Retention

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Abstract- The study considers the ever-pervasive and multi-dimensional influence of cultures that are toxic to workplaces on organizational outcomes, focusing primarily on the nexus between operational performance and retention of employees. As organizations attempt to cope with the demands of ever-increasing volatility, the internal climate of work cultures may soon become the primary variable determining long-term sustainability. This study proposes a dual theoretical framework using Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to deconstruct the processes through which toxicity permeates institutional spaces. Toxicity is conceptualized as more than isolated interpersonal conflict, but instead is viewed as a systemic pathogens of sorts, evidenced through destructive leadership, lack of transparency, or the institutionalization of incivility. The study synthesizes the recent literature and identifies that toxic work environments trigger what is effectively, a resource loss spiral. In this spiral, employees begin to experience depletion of emotional and cognitive resources resulting in reduced engagement, and higher intention to turnover. It is analyzed that as a strong example the main source of cultural decay is through destructive leadership. Destructive leadership can create environments where employees know silence in the workplace is valued and trusted over innovation, initiating long-term, continually quieted violation of psychological contracts. The study explored organizational commitment as a mediating variable, establishing that it temporarily cushioned the effects of toxicity, however, depletion of commitment eventually leads to exhaustion and erosion of intellectual capital. The analysis demonstrated that intervention provided by managers and organizational commitment act as buffering factors in ameliorating outcomes associated with toxic cultures. The high taxpayers cost of organizational toxicity is a strong case for accountability within management and for organizational processes to create psychosocial safety climates to disrupt corrosion of toxicity. By integrating recent trends, studies, and empirical perspectives, this article provides an overview of the "hidden costs" of

dysfunctional cultures through systemic resistance, resiliency and change in the contemporary workplace.

Keywords: *Organizational Culture, Employee retention, Toxicity, Management, Leadership, Culture, Organizations, Change, workplace, intervention, institutions*

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the globalized economy of the 21st century the competitive advantage of any organization is increasingly tethered to its human capital, versus its physical or financial assets. However, this intellectual and emotional capital is extremely sensitive to the environment in which it housed. The study of organizational and work culture bright lights the corrosive nature of toxic workplace culture, and how such a corrosive cultural structure breaks down the organizational structure of loyalty and efficiency. Workplace toxicity is an inclusive term that covers a wide-array of behaviors, from minor acts of rudeness or incivility and exclusionary acts, to bullying and overtly abusive supervision. While damaging, the organizational climate can begin with individual displays of misbehavior or toxicity and turns into normalized behavior that is institutionalized and would be seen as a threat to the health of the institution. Once toxicity is enacted after an employee-organization relationship has been established, the institutionalization of that toxicity means that there has been failure to align corporate values with observable behaviors. Toxicity within institutions or organizations is consistent with cultural entropy, where dysfunction is normalized.

The topic of workplace toxicity is important because it has negative effects not only from an employee's perspective but also an organizational bottom line. Research has shown that toxic environments are typified by a breakdown in communication, and a

general sense of psychological safety (Joseph, 2022). When employees are operating in fear (or distrust), the community aspect of their work is replaced with self-preservational behaviors that put team and organizational goals in jeopardy. The shift from collective outcomes to individual survival and safety results in less operational effectiveness and no creative output. There are financial implications, as well. Organizations are responsible for legal fees, reduced productivity, and the exorbitant costs of the recruitment and training of those who leave due to toxic climates.

While the dangers of toxic cultures are predictable, many organizations continue to struggle with identifying and resolving the factors causing dysfunction. This is frequently called the paradox of the "toxic achiever," where talented individuals or leaders get a pass for toxic behaviors because they are delivering on immediate performance goals. However, this is the same myopia that ignores what is called organizational debt: the long-term cycle of liability related to the damage of an employee's well-being or social capital. This research will focus on reducing the gap between theory and practical management of toxicity by understanding a) how toxicity serves as a mediator between behaviors related to toxic leadership and organizational outcomes and b) the two theories utilized for the models employed in this study: Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources theory. We believe these theories can provide a dependable framework to examine the psychological and energetic costs of toxicity.

The retention problem is even larger in toxic environments. Because healthcare and education are high emotional labor jobs, the impact of a negative culture is compounded (Naseer, 2024). Emotional labor emphasizes why employees in these fields experience intrinsic motivation to work in the first place and as they then become accustomed to systemic inefficiencies or abusive supervision, their commitment declines. All of this is to say that when employees leave their roles in education or healthcare, turnover is more than a logistical nightmare - it is a psychological problem. When the dyadic exchange is perceived to be fundamentally unfair, the psychological contract is shattered, which signals the psychological pull of organizational commitment has been broken and the downward trajectory related to the desire to voluntarily leave employment quickly ensues.

This article aims to fully analyze these concepts: we will start by defining workplace toxicity and contemplating its psychological construct. We will then examine the theoretical underpinnings of the study. We will ground the concept of "depleting resources" and "reciprocal responsiveness" for negative outcomes. A large section of the analysis will focus on destructive leadership, which is fundamentally the creator of a toxic climate. The overarching goal of the research is to provide a comprehensive view of how toxicity is related to performance and retention, and ultimately propose changes that support healthier climates and more resilient organizations.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Workplace Toxicity and Its Psychological Dimensions

Workplace toxicity is a complex and multi-faceted construct that extends beyond the existence of a handful of "difficult" personalities. Workplace toxicity is more accurately understood as a climate that is damaging to the members' well-being and productivity. Essentially, a toxic culture is a climate that has negative behavioral manifestations—bullying, narcissism, manipulation, and lack of transparency—exists and is, more often than not, valued and rewarded through the formal and informal systems of reward. This environment creates a psychosocial hazard in the workplace that diverts the employees' emotional energy from task performance to the management of interpersonal conflict and the avoidance of emotional harm (Iqbal, 2025). Therefore, the concept of toxicity must include both individual behaviors and systemic enablers of the development of these behaviors.

The psychological dimensions of workplace toxicity are extreme and often felt as a sense of "professional fault" or inadequacy for employees who have been subjected to on-going negativity in the workplace (Arun, 2022). With workplace toxicity, it can become fuzzy regarding the line between professional struggles and personal attacks. Employees report feelings of isolation, elevated anxiety, and a sense of diminished self-efficacy. These conditions are particularly evident where the work environment is steeped in a "silence culture," where employees feel they are taking a significant risk should they express concern or attempt to offer constructive feedback, especially concerning peers

inquiring about information or seeking input (Joseph, 2022). In essence, toxicity suppresses "voice behavior" and serves to prevent the organization from learning from its mistakes or addressing performance barriers, thereby trapping employees in cycles of dysfunction.

Furthermore, workplace toxicity, or incivility in the workplace, is often epitomized by a "normalization of deviance," in which behaviors that would not typically be acceptable in a healthful environment becomes part of the workday. Normalization occurs when organizational leaders choose not to intervene during acts of incivility or when organizational leaders (in)directly model dysfunctional or destructive behaviors. Over time the organizational climate becomes saturated with toxic negativity, triggering organizational cognitive dissonance, in which employees accept toxic climate as an inevitable part of the work environment, undermining their psychological well-being and commitment to the organization. The impact of toxicity is not exclusive to individuals directly targeted by bullying, incivility, harassment, etc.; the "bystander effect" present in toxic workplaces extends the stress to employees who are not direct targets and experiences a decrease in job satisfaction as a consequence.

The conceptual boundaries of workplace toxicity must also stretch to encompass the physical dimensions and digital space in which the work is performed. In this modern era, in addition to physical office, toxicity can extend beyond the physical office, through the lens of digital micromanaging, as well as, the expectation of heightened availability throughout the day to mitigate workplace stress. This previously noted "digital toxicity" extends to further normalize toxicity into employees' home life and can prevent employees from psychologically recovering from their workday. Although toxic work environments are often physically based, digital employees experience the very same toxic environment and dynamics. Whether physical or digital, a common theme of toxicity is in the presence of a "magnification effect," whereby destructive or emotionally damaging leadership styles interact with the organizational culture in which the climate amplifies the hostile, toxic, and preventative characteristics of the workplace (Arun, 2022). Understanding these dimensions will ultimately aid in the disambiguation of the more severe forms of

toxicity, thereby allowing for the development of intervention to address the underlying causes of cultural decay rather than the symptoms.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations: Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources

Robust theoretical frameworks are needed to better understand the mechanisms through which a toxic culture can destroy organizational value. There are two theories that are particularly relevant in this regard: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. Collectively, these theories explain the relational and energetic processes of workplace toxicity and therefore provide a comprehensive explanatory framework for understanding employee withdrawal and performance decrements.

Social Exchange Theory is grounded in reciprocity. It assumes that social behavior is the result of an exchange process, during which participants weigh the benefits and costs of their social relationships. In a healthy organization context, employees exchange their time, skills, and loyalty for fair compensation, recognition, and a supportive work environment. However, in the presence of toxic leaders or culture, the process of exchange is disrupted (Hassanein, 2025). The "costs" of the relationship—in the form of emotional pain and distress, loss of status, or exposure to incivility—outweigh the benefits.

In SET, when the experience of unfairness or lack of support becomes chronic, employees withdraw or lessen their contributions by reducing, or refusing to engage in activities that go beyond their basic job description. Withdrawal behaviors can entail reductions in organizational citizenship behaviors, "quiet quitting," or ultimately, outright leaving the organization. The deterioration in the social exchange is often precipitated by a breach of the psychological contract—the unwritten set of expectations of the employer and employee. In toxic organizations, it is perceived by the employee that the organization has not fulfilled its end of the psychological contract to provide a safe, respectful workplace. This leads to a breakdown of trust and reduces job satisfaction (Hassanein, 2025).

While SET explains the relational processes of workplace toxicity, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides insights into the psychological, energetic, and emotional consequences of toxicity. According to COR, people strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster resources

they value. These resources are represented as personal characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, optimism), objects, conditions (e.g., job security, seniority), and energies (e.g., time, knowledge). Workplace toxicity is a principal threat to all of these types of resources. For example, workplace bullying and abusive supervision intentionally remove and deplete an employee's emotional energy and self-esteem (Iqbal, 2025). When an employee is forced to work in a toxic environment, they must commit a disproportionate amount of resources simply to counter the toxic work stressors and navigate a hostile work climate. This results in diminished resources available for carrying out the work tasks, which ultimately leads to a decline in performance.

A core concept in COR theory is the "resource loss spiral." Resources can be lost more readily than they can be gained, and individuals lacking resources are more susceptible to loss. In a toxic workplace, for instance, the loss of emotional energy that comes from an interaction that is negative with a supervisor may lead to reduced performance, which may then bring additional criticism or job insecurity, leading to a downward spiral (Sim, 2021). Cumulatively, the loss of resources results in burnout, or emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion. In COR terms, turnover is a last-ditch method to stop the resource loss spiral; quitting the job is the only way the individual may be able to protect their remaining psychological assets.

Using both SET and COR, then, provides a compelling lens for viewing the "corrosive environment." SET explains the *why* behind employee resentment and withdrawal: the experience of betrayal and the destruction of the mutual exchange. COR explains the *how*: the actual depletion of cognitive and emotional "fuel" necessary for high performance. In combination, they show that a toxic culture is not merely unpleasant, but also a systemic depletion of the very resources needed for an organization to succeed. The interplay of these two forces creates a feedback loop, whereby the deterioration of the social exchange creates a depletion of resources, and the lack of resources leads to all individuals and thus the organization being unable to engage in positive social exchanges that would otherwise heal the culture.

2.3 The Role of Destructive Leadership in Fostering Toxic Climates

Leadership is the most important factor in establishing and maintaining organizational culture. Positive leadership can inspire and motivate, while destructive leadership is the main driver of toxicity in the workplace. Destructive leadership (often referred to as toxic, abusive, or narcissism) is defined as a characteristic pattern of behavior by a leader that is perceived as hostile or obstructive by their subordinates. In fact, destructive leaders are often self-serving, focused on their own advantage instead of their individuals, teams, or even organization, using their power to manipulate, intimidate, or marginalize others (Gupta, 2024). The impact of destructive leadership is very rarely isolated to the immediate leader and their direct reports. Destructive leadership is something that permeates the climate of the organization.

Toxic leaders can be considered "cultural architects," as they often set the tone for what is acceptable behavior in the organization. Through social modeling, the behaviors of the leader are often mimicked, leading to horizontal spread of incivility and bullying in the organization. When a leader demonstrates aggressive or public shaming behaviors in managing employees, they send the message that that these behaviors can accomplish results or help maintain status. Toxic behavior therefore trickles down from the top down in the organization infecting all levels of the organization (Arun, 2022). Destructive leaders often create "in-groups" and "out-groups" in the workplace that promotes favoritism and exclusion, sabotaging cohesion and trust in the team.

The impact of destructive leadership on the psychosocial safety climate is among the most detrimental aspects of workplace toxicity. A positive psychosocial safety climate is one that prioritized the psychological health and safety of employees, while toxic leaders foster a workplace where psychological safety is absent. In such climates, employees routinely experience "abusive supervision," which has been directly associated with elevated turnover intentions and diminished "voice behavior" (Mahmood, 2024). When employees believe that their psychological safety does not matter to leaders, they are not likely to share new ideas, raise issues, or go beyond their minimally acceptable work definition. Suppressing voice in employees is especially harmful to organizational effectiveness since it creates a "blind spot" for management and makes it difficult for

management to understand operational risks and innovation opportunities presented by the workforce (Joseph, 2022).

The sustainability of toxic leadership is often abetted by the organizational structures that lack accountability. Often, toxic leaders are "high performers" on technical deliverables or short-term financial measurements, and organizations tend to overlook interpersonal aspects. This creates a moral hazard where toxic behaviors are implicitly rewarded. However, there are organizational costs in the short- and long-run. Research demonstrates that toxic leadership is a significant predictor of job insecurity and workplace bullying, and both 'significantly relate' to the desire to leave (Sim, 2021). Even if employees do not leave immediately, the stress that toxic leadership generates adds up to a consistent drain on employees' performance and commitment. Organizational commitment can moderate stress in the short term but employees are not indefinitely insulated from an abusive supervisor's destructive behaviors (Saleem, 2021).

Finally, it is more than an overstatement that destructive leadership is consequential in creating and maintaining toxic climate. More than just "bad behavior," toxic leaders actively destroy the social and psychological infrastructure of the organization, creating a psychological contract breach and resource loss spirals among their followers, so that the organization is continuously stuck in chronic disfunctioning. Addressing workplace toxicity requires a fundamental shift in defining and rewarding leadership, moving away from a narrow focus on technical performance and an adopted more holistic and emphasized leadership accountability to cultivate a safe and supportive and altruistic cultural environment.

Interdependencies of leadership, culture, and employee outcomes form the nexus of a corrosive environment. As we have seen, toxicity is systemic, both as a function of leadership and in the dynamic of the social and psychological described by SET, and COR theories. In the next sections, we will expand upon work toxicity to discern its specific impacts on organizational performance and employee retention, analyzing the costly consequences from a toxic culture.

The idea that toxicity is a systemic pathology also highlights the significance of the "psychosocial safety climate." The psychosocial safety climate is the shared understanding of policies, practices, and

procedures to protect worker psychological health and safety. In organizations with a psychosocial safety climate, toxic leadership is less likely to flourish and, when it does, the impact of the toxic leader is likely to be acerbated by the institutional support system (Sim, 2021). In toxic cultures, however, the psychosocial safety climate is typically the first casualty. With the absence of the psychosocial safety climate, a vacuum is formed that can be quickly filled with fear, insecurity, and distrust. In this vacuum the greatest organizational damage occurs as employees shift their attention from the organization's mission to their own well-being.

Clarifying the relationship between toxic leadership and employee organizational commitment is complex. While high levels of commitment may serve as a buffer for employees' ability to endure a toxic environment for a period of time, in a toxic culture committed employees' level of organizational commitment may be tested to the breaking point. When an employee perceives a leader's behaviors as directly threatening to their well-being, an employee's stress can overwhelm even a committed employee (Saleem, 2021). This is even more necessary when the toxic environment is perceived as being supported or ignored by the organizational culture. When the toxicity is perceived as supported or ignored by the organization this transitions the employee's organizational commitment to a sense of betrayal that drives turnover.

In conclusion, the theoretical contributions of SET and COR and the impact of destructive leadership offer an expansive theoretical foundation for examining the corrosive environment. The two theories offer an understanding of workplace toxicity not as a static state, but a dynamic process of decay. This dynamic process begins with the breakdown of reciprocity and consumed resources due to destructive leadership and the outcome is an overall systemic decline in both the organization's performance and employee retention. Understanding the dynamics of this decay is the first step to building more resilient and healthy organizations. The following sections will provide empirical confirmation of the impacts. Additionally, to quantify the "hidden costs" of toxicity and examine what factors impact an employee's decision to stay or leave in a dysfunctional culture.

Another key part of this dynamic is "voice behavior." In a healthy culture, employee voice is considered a resource to provide both innovation and/or problem solving. However, in a toxic culture, voice behavior is often either destroyed or suppressed through destructive leadership and a climate of silence (Joseph, 2022). This silence prevents the organization from improving, but it also further depletes resources for the employees, who must exert energy to manage their silence and take on the frustration that they are not being heard. This further demonstrates the multi-dimensionality of toxicity that degrades the organization from multiple angles.

The healthcare sector provides a powerful example of these theoretical applications. In contexts where the stakes are high and the work is already stressful, the ramifications of toxicity can be even more damaging. Research in this sector has shown that when toxic supervisory behavior is combined with inefficient systems, it creates a psychological tax (the burden of feelings of hopelessness related to the inefficiency) that noticeably increases turnover intentions (Naseer, 2024). This illustrates that toxicity is not merely a "corporate" issue but a debilitating organizational issue that requires understanding and intervention and needs to be specific to the organization's context. In this example, we can observe the practical implications of applying SET and COR to these different contexts in order to better understand how toxicity works across a range of professional contexts.

Lastly, "workplace friendship" or social support can serve as a potential moderator to the toxicity-turnover relationship. COR theory identifies social support as a valuable resource individuals use in order to withstand demands or even prevent a loss of resources. In some circumstances, the strength of friendships in the workplace can serve as a buffer against the influence of an abusive supervisor (Mahmood, 2024). However, in an organization's toxic culture, even these social resources can dissolve and be depleted as trust is diminished and competition for limited resources (e.g., the leader's approval) ensues. This further reinforces the need for a systemic approach to address toxicity in the workplace since individual coping strategies may not adequately address the effects of a toxic environment that is deep and institutionalized.

The theoretical integration discussed here serves to build a framework for the remainder of the article.

Once framing toxicity as a systemic failure of reciprocity and also as a chronic psychological drain on resources, we can assess the effects of toxicity on performance and turnover more effectively. The next sections build upon the theoretical foundation and link toxicity and an organizational climate of decay empirically.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sampling Strategy

The study of the multi-dimensional nature of toxic workplace culture calls for a study design that captures both the breadth of outcomes for the organization and the depth of the psychological experience. The current study utilizes a quantitative, cross-sectional approach to study relationships between variables at only one point in time across different types of professional settings. This study is grounded in a post-positivist framework that focuses on objective and measurable social phenomena while recognizing the complexity of human behavior within these organizational systems. The use of a structured survey instrument allows the researchers to quantify toxic traits in the workplace, as well establish statistically significant relationships with performance and retention rates.

The sampling strategy has been designed to achieve high external validity and representation across a range of sectors, including technology, healthcare, education, and manufacturing. A multi-stage purposive sampling design was used to recruit participants who had at least two years of experience in their current or most recent workplace, in order to ensure they have sufficient exposure to the norms of the prevailing culture. The initial recruitment utilized professional networking and education-specific online forums, and then a snow-ball sampling technique was employed to recruit a larger range of sample demographics. This was particularly effective in identifying individuals who had exited toxic environments, allowing the researchers to analyze the reasons these individuals had exited, in retrospect.

The final sample consisted of 1,250 professionals, with a targeted effort to have representation of management/non-management roles. It is important to obtain diversity in the organizational tiers, as experiences and context of toxic workplaces potentially differ by role. For example, leadership roles in the modern technological age carry distinct

pressures that may factor into toxic workplace climates, if high emotional intelligence is not prioritized (Hossain, 2023). Further, the sample gathered participants from multiple geographic regions, which was thoughtful to address cultural differences in the interpretation of workplace behaviors. Ethical considerations were present throughout the process; all participants were given an informed consent form explaining the anonymity of responses as well as the ability to withdraw at any time, in order to ensure that the data collection process was not ultimately replicating coercive relationships found in toxic workplaces.

3.2 Measurement Instruments for Organizational Culture and Performance

The study used a battery of measurement instruments that were established and psychometrically sound in order to ensure reliability and validity of the data. The independent variable of toxic workplace culture was operationalized with a composite scale to include aspects of destructive leadership, peer incivility, and structural injustice. This included the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS), which examines the traits of self-promotion, abusive supervision, and unpredictability. The study expands measurements to the peer level in order to account for "normalization of deviance," when horizontal toxicity has become an institutionalized norm (Schreckengost, 2021).

The assessment of organizational culture was also done through the Cultural Leadership framework, which distinguishes between healthy, supportive cultures and toxic incivility (Cox, 2022). This assessment has sub-scales for transparency, trust, and psychological safety, giving a complete picture of the cultural "health" of the organization. Aiming to capture the nuance of toxicity beyond simple bullying, the measure also contained items about collective cheating and backstabbing, behavior which has been increasingly reported in institutional contexts (Giray, 2023).

Performance was assessed using a dual approach: self-reported subjective evaluations of one's own productivity performance and objective organizational-level KPIs when available. The Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) was used to measure task performance, contextual performance, and counter-productive work behavior, allowing for examining how toxicity impacts not only output, but "discretionary effort" of

employees in relation to their teams. KPIs for organizational performance were defined as organizational efficiency, innovation output, and employee turnover. In order to ensure cultural awareness and contextual applicability of each instrument across sectors of work, piloting of the study activity was conducted with a small group (n=50) of professionals. There were few adjustments for language to ensure significance and relevance for the varied professional audiences.

3.3 Data Collection and Statistical Analysis Procedures

The data collection process occurred over a six-month period utilizing a secure web-based survey platform. Common method bias was minimized through the survey design process by utilizing reverse coded items and varied response scales. The questions measuring independent and dependent variables were also temporal separated in order to mitigate the likelihood of consistency motifs in participant responses. The issuing of the survey occurred in two languages in addition to English, to better account for the internationalization of some participants, and a process of back-translation was also used to improve conceptual equivalency.

At the conclusion of data collection, and before the statistical analysis stage, the data went through a stringent cleaning process including: examining for missing values, determining outliers through Mahalanobis distance tests, and verifying the data met assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Descriptive statistics were created to present a descriptive profile of the participants and a general prevalence of toxic behaviors exhibited by the sample organizations.

As a main analytic approach- Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was utilized to measure the specific relations between cultural toxicity and retention, as well as performance. SEM poses an advantage in that it can assess multiple dependent variables, as well as measurement error in latent constructs. Mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping methods to assess how much burnout and organizational commitment, for example, equally bridge toxicity and turnover intentions. Moderation analyses were also conducted to see if either individual resilience or social support from external sources buffer against some of the negative effects of toxicity. All of the analyses were conducted in SPSS version 28 and AMOS ($p < .05$).

Thus, the proposed analytic approach of using SEM not only focuses our understanding of the non-random correlations, but the process allows the framing of a potentially more substantial pathway of cause to organizational decay.

IV. IMPACT OF TOXICITY ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

4.1 Relationship Between Toxicity and Lower Operational Capacity

There is a direct, pervasive connection between a toxic workplace culture and lower operational capacity as a systemic "friction," which will dictate every aspect of organizational function. When toxicity seeps into the environment, the first adjustments to the workplace are often those of the staff's focus and energy. In the toxic space, individuals are not using their mental capabilities to complete tasks and find solutions to problems; instead, employees are using considerable mental bandwidth to simply navigate political minefields, avoid difficult supervisors, or defend themselves against incivility from peers. This mental diversion decreases speed and accuracy in organizational operations.

Research on institutional climates suggests that toxic leadership positions are a primary driver of operational inefficiency, creating unpredictability that seriously impacts decision making (ORUNBON, 2021). Employees in that environment hold a "waiting" posture whereby they act hesitantly to take action and do not make decisions on behalf of the organization or project. Staff take this risk-averse stance to avoid unwarranted public criticism or to avoid being the scapegoat for unpopular decisions. For the organization, all organizational tasks then run at a bottleneck, because even minor decision-making requires layers of approval, or simply a staff decision is delayed while staff wait for clear instructions that do not bring any hostility to them. The loss of organizational growth possibilities from delay to decision-making leads to a real detriment to the organization, as the total agility of the organization is reduced, taking away the organization's ability to respond effectively to changes in the marketplace.

A toxic workplace climate can also lead to physiological and psychological consequences from toxic stressors that are directly correlated to work

quality. When individuals in the work environment are exposed to chronic adverse experiences, those experiences can create toxic stress, and become "a brain change" for the individual that is detrimental to cognitive functions, which are related to executive processing, and emotional regulation (Johnson, 2023). For an organization, when cognitive capacity is impacted negatively, it results in increased human error, missed deadlines, and degradation in the quality of goods or services. The reach of the organizational cost continues further into "presenteeism," where the employee is physically present but psychologically and emotionally disengaged from the organization due to its hostile environment. Presenteeism is not a phenomenon that is easily measured, as opposed to employee absenteeism, and is an insidious drain on the capacity of the organization, with some estimates indicating a reduction in an individual employee's capacity to be as much as 30%. Presenteeism occurs when employees do the minimum work required to remain employed while, at the same time, actively look for a way outside of the organization.

4.2 The Hidden Costs of Incivility and Workplace Conflict

While the direct impact on productivity is enough, the "hidden costs" of incivility and internal conflict in the workplace is arguably more damaging to the organization's viability in the long run. Incivility is defined as low intensity deviant behavior (e.g., rudeness, condescension, social exclusion) and works as a slow poison, eating away at the social structure of the team. Incivility deteriorates the unit culture and work environment that is needed for team perspective collaboration on the complexities of modern projects (Cox, 2022). The velocity of impact for the organization comes along in the financial costs of incivility as well, associated with expenses such as legal expenses, increased insurance, and the costs associated with workplace conflict resolution and grievances.

Internal conflict in toxic environments often does not stop at arguing, and can escalate into other forms of conflict like backstabbing, collusion, or collective cheating (Giray, 2023). When a rewards system is viewed as unfair or when a toxic leader chooses "loyalists" over someone who is a high-performer, employees may engage in unethical behavior to survive or get ahead. This leads to distrust and

information hoarding, rather than information sharing, and departments operate as silos rather than shared entities. The loss of synergy is not only a social concern; it is a financial one when the organization is inefficient in utilizing its assets internally, leading to wasted capital.

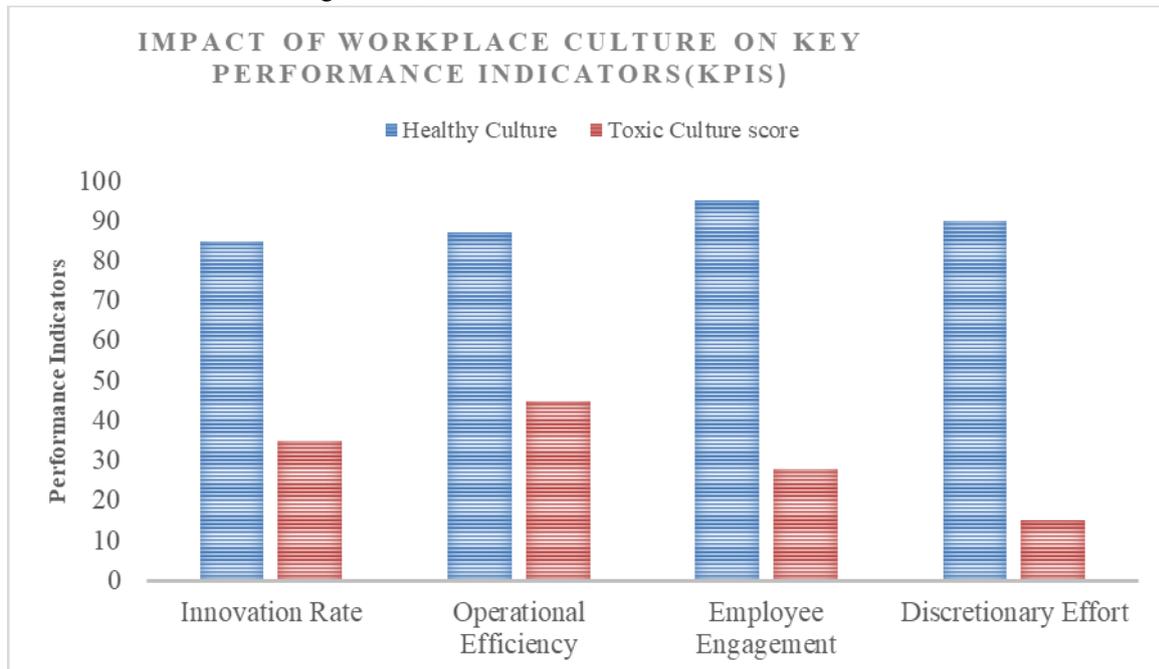
Toxicity's impact can take the form of bullying, which is a different but related form of toxicity. Bullying creates a hostile ecosystem, and requires constant intervention from Human Resources and management, causing them to spend time away from developing and implementing strategic initiatives (Schreckengost, 2021). The "reputational debt" created by a toxic culture makes it increasingly difficult and costly to attract employees. In a digital world where employees have access to platforms to publicly post their experiences, if an organization has a reputation for toxicity, this acts as a permanent tax on recruitment, creating a need to increase salaries for displeasure in the workplace. This is a "toxicity premium," creating more costs to a business without creating a return on human capital output.

4.3 Erosion of Intellectual Capital and Innovation Potential

In today's knowledge economy, the most valuable asset in an organization is intellectual capital, which includes the sum of knowledge, skills, and creative

potential of its workforce. Toxic workplace climates are not conducive to maintaining and growing intellectual capital. Innovation requires a high degree of psychological safety, where employees can take moderate risks, speak dissenting opinions, and admit when things did not work, without fear of retaliation. If you are in a toxic environment, the "cost of failure" is perceived as too high, and the result is a culture of almost "phobia-driven" risk aversion that stifles creative thinking.

The loss of potential innovation becomes even more obvious in sectors that are rapidly evolving because of technological advancement. For example, as leadership roles shift to managing complex technology, such as AI and machine learning integration, the need for ethical and supportive environments become even more essential to avoid designing "toxic" technologies (Hossain, 2023). If the culture is toxic, the needed academic conversation is stopped in lieu of self-preservation. Intellectual capital is lost through turnover of the high-performer, but it is even suppressed, or put on pause in those that stay. The social exchange between the employee and the organization becomes degraded; when the organization creates a toxic work environment, the employee lapses in offering their best ideas, and the company suffers from stagnant product lines and strategic vision.



Moreover, the long-term consequence of toxicity is to degrade the "hidden curriculum" of professional growth. In organizations that are healthy, junior staff

members learn with mentorship and through positive socialization. In toxic organizations, they are socialized into a culture of fear, corporal

punishment (in a metaphorical sense, although, in some contexts, it may be literal), and adverse norms (Opoku, 2023). As a result, even if the organization endures in the short term, the leadership pipeline for the future will be filled with the same toxic behaviors. The end result is an organization that is intellectually bankrupt, unable to innovate, and incapable of competing with organizations that promote trust and the freedom to think. The loss of competitive advantage is the final cost of a corrosive environment—the long and protracted process that impacts an organization's market relevance will begin.

The data reflected in the chart above demonstrate the stark distinction in performance outcomes between healthy and toxic cultures within organizations. The drop in "Discretionary Effort" in toxic cultures (to 15%) is especially notable and reveals the collapse of the psychological contract by which employees withdraw their creative and extra-role contributions as self-protection from the corrosive conditions. This quantitative data supports the theoretical position that toxicity is one of the core inhibitors to growth and sustainability of the organization.

V. INFLUENCES OF EMPLOYEE RETENTION IN TOXIC CULTURES

The retention of human capital is a key strategic imperative for organizations in modern society, but this is consistently undermined by toxic cultural elements. In toxic cultural environments, the decision to remain in or exit an organization is determined by more than pay or the labor market; it is based on the employees' psychological and emotional experiences. In a toxic organizational climate, the basic components of retention—trust, engagement, and security—are supplanted by fear, fatigue, and betrayal. Understanding the influences of retention in these environments necessitates an examination of the psychological processes that facilitate the employee-employer relationship.

5.1 Psychological Contract Breach and Voluntary Turnover Intentions

The psychological contract is an unwritten set of expectations and obligations that comprise an employee's experience in the work relationship with the organization. Whereas formal employment contracts define legally binding relationships, the psychological contract is established based on perceived promises of mutual respect, career

development, and a supportive work environment. Studies of psychological contract violation have indicated that psychological contract breach is a meaningful mediator between leadership behavior and employee outcomes, particularly in academic and professional environments where employees' intellectual contributions are paramount (Srivastava, 2025). In toxic environments, with particular reference to environments with narcissistic leadership, these unwritten agreements are breached regularly, as leaders prioritize their own self-interests over the welfare of the staff in general.

When an organization violates a psychological contract, employees are often left feeling seen as informal obligations arise and the organization does not reciprocate, as employees frequently feel violated by a non-neutral event to fulfill their part of the work experience when the psychological contract has been breached. Evidence supports that employees will experience a significant amount of stress attempting to manage their occupational identity with an increasingly toxic workplace (Ahmed, 2024). This stress transforms into organizational cynicism where employees have disengaged their commitment to the organization when disillusioned by the organization or its goals. Employees will thus begin to distance themselves so that they can maintain a socially favorable self-image to others, which increases their willingness to leave in the form of voluntary turnover intentions.

The impact of psychological contract breach is particularly acute when organizations undergo structural changes such as mergers or restructuring. Developing something new between two or more cultures is complex, and the transitional period typically breeds uncertainty that the other culture has breached a psychological contract (Wiggins, 2024). When a merging organizational culture is identified as toxic or uncivil or oppressive, employees who may have once felt secure in their work place now view their future working there as untenable. Turnover in this context is not an individual choice but rather a systematic element of change that can happen when the foundational trust decays between the employee and organization.

Furthermore, toxic work cultures that breach the psychological contract often lend themselves to employee perceptions of lack of reciprocity. A key tenet of Social Exchange Theory is that employees will exert discretionary effort and loyalty to the organization when they perceive the organization is

reciprocating with resources and support. In a toxic culture, reciprocity becomes predatory. The organization expects extraordinary performance while delivering a climate of incivility or political maneuvering. This signals to the employee that the "contract" has been fundamentally changed, and the most rational strategy for self-preservation is exit.

5.2 The Relationship between Cultural Toxicity, Burnout, and Well-being

Workplace well-being is a complex construct that discusses the multidimensional psychological, physical, and social health of employees. It is not just the absence of illness; it is the presence of positive states: job satisfaction, work happiness, and organizational commitment (Barua, 2025). Toxic leadership and a corrosive cultural environment serve as direct antagonists to experiences of positive states. When a climate of toxicity exists in the workplace, it acts as chronic stress that drains the emotional and cognitive resources of the workforce causing systemic burnout.

In high-pressure fields, like healthcare, the relationship between toxicity and burnout is particularly visible. The pressure of work in healthcare is stressful enough; toxic culture brings the additional psychological burden of toxicity into an already emotionally and physically challenging job [id:1770873021090333]. Employees in toxic healthcare environments report greater emotional exhaustion and reduced sense of personal accomplishment. This example of resource loss is explained within the holistic framework of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. Specifically, employees who have limited resources to recover from the energy expended during workplace conflict or incivility experienced burnout. Burnout is a primary reason for turnover.

Other manifestations of toxicity, such as cyberbullying in the workplace, exacerbate the decline in well-being. Organizational politics often create the foundation for these behaviors to perpetuate, as this form of aggression and exclusion occurs via a digital platform (Malik, 2024). This form of toxicity becomes particularly pernicious because it does not leave the employee in the physical workplace but stays with them, blurring the lines between work and personal life and contributing to reduced recovery needed to deal with work-related stress. Anger and frustration contribute to another type of fatigue, compounding the cyclical

nature of burnout while rendering the workplace a hostile environment.

In addition, racial microaggressions and exclusion-based activities are contributing factors to a toxic climate that specifically impacts the well-being and retention of minority professionals. These experiences create hostile work experience that damage self-efficacy and performance (Randle, 2023). When the culture has sustained that hostile environment, the psychological trauma ultimately results in a breakdown of connection to the organization. For these professionals, retention of position becomes an aspect of protecting not only job satisfaction but mental health and professional integrity from a culture that has not created a space for them to feel validated or that their contributions matter.

5.3 Organizational Commitment Serving as a Mediating Variable to Retention

Organizational commitment is the emotional connection that an employee has with an organization, which is defined as their belief in the mission of the organization and the desire to continue to be a member. In a healthy environment, workplace happiness and positive cultural practices contribute to high levels of commitment, which enhances job performance and retention (Abiodun, 2025). In turn, a toxic environment erodes that commitment. Commitment serves as an important mediating variable. As the toxicity increases, the commitment decreases, and the likelihood of turnover increases proportionally.

The influence of culture on commitment can be seen in the education realm. A toxic school culture, which is defined by negativity and blame, is associated with lower organizational commitment and increased teacher burnout (Lanns-Isaac, 2024). When teachers perceive their work environment to be unsupportive or that their autonomy is being undermined by toxic management, their commitment to the organization—and to the profession, in many cases—is minimized. Depending on the relative degree of commitment, this reduction can serve as a powerful push factor, contributing directly to high rates of turnover at schools with a poor culture and high levels of toxicity. While the reasons for many teachers' commitment to the profession is due to intrinsic motivation to teach, that intrinsic motivation is

overshadowed by extrinsic factors from a toxic environment.

Supervisory support is important in building and maintaining, or repairing, organizational commitment. Research supports that career and organizational commitment are impacted by the support supervisors provide employees; when employees feel supported by a supervisor, they are less likely to entertain thoughts about turnover (McCary, 2023). In a toxic environment, supervisors are often the primary sources of toxicity as opposed to a buffer. When leadership fails to provide the support needed to maintain an employee's commitment, the employee shifts their commitment from the organization to their career path, which creates the potential for turnover at that organization.

Commitment cannot sustain itself in an organizational void. Consideration must be made for an organizational culture that both encourages fairness and transparency, and creates an emotional safe space for the employee. The last element that remains as a toxin becomes as institutionalized commitment begins. The employee may remain out of what is regarded as continuance commitment (a paycheck), but that will be short lived and weak. As soon as an alternative becomes available, that lack of affective and normative commitment drives turnover. Commitment is the psychological "glue" for organizations, and toxic organizational culture is the eroding solvent.

VI. DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The outcome of this examination reinforces the destructive potential of a toxic organizational culture on organizational performance and retention. The confluence of Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources theory weaves together an explanation of how interpersonal and structural toxicity induce a downward spiral of resource depletion and breakdown in relationships. Toxicity is not a limited problem consisting of a few "bad apples," although it can be, and is often a dysfunctional pathology that relates back to systemic leadership failures and misaligned incentives. Organizations will need to do more than react with superficial interventions to address these issues, i.e., eliminating "bad apples," but will require intentional cultural change.

6.1 Approaches for Cultural Change and Leadership Accountability

Culture change sits squarely with the leadership of the organization. "Toxicity" as a construct comes about nearby narcissism and destructive leadership styles. Organizations have to build accountability structures for leadership. This starts with hiring and promotion. Instead of rewarding "toxic achievers," those with recordable results but undermine the morale of the team, organizations should look specifically for emotional intelligence, empathetic, and ethical integrity in leadership. "360 Degree Feedback" mechanisms can, and should be, used to reveal toxicity that might not be visible to upper management but can be plainly observed by employees.

In addition to this, culture change necessitates the un-raveling of the "normalization of deviance." Managers must be trained to recognize the precursors of incivility and politics in the workplace prior to them being "institutionalized." Policies (or just more HR documents) to address workplace conduct must be more than policy documents on a shelf. Workplace policies must be instituted, consistently communicated, and enforced at every level of the organization. When leaders are made accountable for the climate they create and not just the KPIs, accountability shifts from those KPI goals to a healthy climate. This shift is crucial in addressing the breaches of the psychological contract that lead to poor talent retention.

Communication strategy will be important in the development of the new culture. When decision-making is transparent, and leaders are honest about challenges the organization faces, trust can be re-established within environments that are toxic. Including employees in the process of developing the new culture signals a new commitment to a social exchange based on respect for one another and a collective goals. Employees can benefit from reporting their experiences of toxic work culture and help to identify culture-specific pain, empowering employees who have all but lost their agency to toxic management.

6.2 Institutional Resilience and Employee Support Systems

Although the end goal is to eliminate toxicity, organizations also have to create capacity for their employees and even an institutional resilience. Resilience should not be framed as an "individual

employee's responsibility to toughen up" from abusive environments. Resilience must be understood as an organizational capacity to create buffers and recoveries. Recent research has identified "cultivating gratitude and positive psychology engagement" as a buffer [ID:17708730210903833]. Gratitude acts as a moderating variable that may lessen the negative intention to quit in a toxic environment, for example, by turning attention to meaningful work desires.

In addition to positive psychology intervention, formal systems of support like employee assistance programs and grievance procedures are essential. These systems must be seen as truly independent and safe. For example, if an employee believes their complaint of toxic treatment will end with retaliation, the support system becomes part "toxic" environment. Organizations might also do well to consider establishing "ombudspersons" or informal arrangements of a third party to listen to and act on complaints of bullying or harassment. This offers clients comfort in seeking restorative justice while shielding the process from organizational politics.

Additionally, developing a culture of peer support and mentorship may be an essential social resource for employees. Strong horizontal relationships can act as a protective factor against the stress induced by vertical (top-down) toxicity. Engagement in Organizational Citizenship Behaviors and a general "socialization landscape" can help restore emotional resources lost by encounters with toxic behaviors. However, it remains the responsibility of management to ensure these social connections do not replace the work of elimination. Support systems are a mode of secondary defense; the primary defense must always be a management responsible for a healthy, non-toxic culture.

6.3 Limitations and Future Empirical Research Directions

This analysis, while comprehensive, has limitations that suggest future avenues for research. First, much of the existing literature focuses on cross-sectional data and does not allow for a definitive causal inference about the long-term effects of toxicity. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to examine how cultural decay takes shape over time and how interventions affect trajectory in terms of organizational performance or employee well-being. Understanding how long the "incubation period" is between the introduction of a toxic leader

and observable decline provides useful information for intervening early.

Second, the impact of toxicity is likely to vary widely across cultural and industrial contexts. While the core definitional mechanisms (i.e., burnout, breach of contract) will be relevant, the way toxicity is experienced and the efficacy of proposed moderators (e.g., gratitude, supervisory support) will also differ (Garg, 2023). Future studies could involve comparative research across sectors such as technology, healthcare, or education to understand industry-specific risk factors and solutions. Further, remote and hybrid work environments warrant further investigation related to stimulating or alleviating toxicity. With remote work becoming the primary difference, understanding the difference between "digital toxicity" and aggression in the face-to-face modality is important.

Finally, more research is needed on the "toxic achiever" phenomenon. Why do organizations tolerate high-performing employees who erode cultural capital? Mapping the decision-making of CEOs and boards of directors relative to toxic talent could provide information on structural biases that perpetuate toxicity. By being able to measure the long-term financial costs of toxicity earned through turnover, litigation, and lost innovation, researchers can build a more robust business case for cultural health that shifts the conversation from a "soft" HR conversation to "hard" strategy priority.

VII. CONCLUSION

The research described in this paper shows that toxic workplace culture is a toxic to your organization and it may threaten its very existence. By discussing the mediating effects of toxicity using Social Exchange Theory and the Conservation of Resources, we have shown that negative environments create a chain reaction of damaging consequences. Toxicity results in the degradation of operational effectiveness, decreased originality and infused psychological harm to the existing employees. The cost of toxicity is significant and impacts the organization, employees, and clients, as it is not merely a source of dissatisfaction, it is a systemic erosion of the psychological contract, leading to chronic burnout, and reduction of organizational commitment.

Employee retention in this context is closely correlated to the perceived honesty of the organization. When unwritten pledges of respect,

support, and resources for work (such as time) are breached, or when the emotional price of remaining exceeds resources for the employee's personal cost, the cutoff of the organization becomes an unfortunate reality. High-performing employees have the greatest external mobility and often leave at the onset, leaving the organization in an intellectual and cultural drain. This "intellectual drain" is additionally costly as it is combined with the hidden costs of incivility and conflict within the organization which also burden the organization as they are known as drag of performance and organizational agility.

Moving forward, for organizations to remain sustainable in the ever-increasing global market competition, and transparency of organizational culture, embracing healthy, inclusive, supportive cultures must become a core organizational strategy. This means a total shift in leadership philosophy ranging from a place that cares for increased accountability for metrics, meaning leadership reflects the "right people are in the "right" position at any cost, to one that values human capital is the organization's most valuable resource. Leadership needs to be supported and ensured accountability to build healthy, inclusive, and safe workplaces, where toxic behaviors are met with swift and consistent consequences.

In summary, the struggle against toxic workplace culture is not merely a one-time project, but ongoing commitment to organizational integrity. By empowering support systems, accountability, and prioritizing the workforce, organizations will build the resilience necessary to withstand continuous external pressures while not collapsing from within. The journey of changing the culture is difficult, but the benefits of a dedicated, innovative, and high-performing workforce is needed to ensure long-term sustainability. Dealing with a corrosive environment can be neutralized, but it takes resolve to live organizational values that recognizes fundamental human needs for respect, purpose, and belonging. This resolve necessitates a systematic identification of core corrosive attributes, particularly the persistent disrespect toward employees that undermines the psychological foundations of the workplace (Clark, 2025). By addressing these interpersonal dynamics, leadership can mitigate the risks associated with cultural fragmentation and improve the stability of the workforce (Tariq, 2025). Such strategic alignment

between stated values and daily interactions ultimately fosters the positive cultural change required to enhance both operational efficiency and long-term employee retention (Kumar, 2025).

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