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Toxic Leadership in Education: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

There has been sparse research explicitly looking at toxic leadership, a more complex and comprehensive destructive leadership style in higher education settings, despite the breadth of literature on destructive leadership styles and their impact on organizational culture, mission, and individuals. With the introduction of the term “toxic leadership” in 1996, the corporate world and military agencies began to examine whether leadership could lead to a toxic culture. As of 2007, studies have been unable to connect the concept of learning in higher education systems to the phenomenon of "social learning." To better understand how studies have changed since they were conducted in the 2000s, the authors use their analysis of the literature on toxic leadership in higher ed from three different perspectives: 1) Understanding how toxic leadership affects organizational culture and employee morale. 2) Summarizing the role of toxic leadership in shaping the environment in which employees operate. 3) Speculating on what can be done to manage the risk of building and sustaining such environments.

Keywords: toxic leadership; education organizational culture; employee morale; educational.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership is a field of study that has emerged from organizational psychology, with most academic scholars focusing on leadership development and how primary, secondary, and tertiary education leaders are optimizing the educational landscape. This article stresses the leadership of tertiary education in education. To recognize the complexities of higher education and provide the requisite education and preparation for university administrators, research focusing on higher education leadership and higher education graduate programs has evolved enormously over the years (Goodchild, 2014). In the field of educational leadership, the spectrum of leadership styles, from positive to disruptive leadership and its characteristics, has recently begun to be discussed by scholars (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Pelletier, 2010). Current literature reviews indicate that, particularly in the military and private sector organizations, there appears to be a strong interest in understanding disruptive leadership.

For decades, academic researchers have been focusing on how leaders can enhance their organizations and increase their followers' efficiency. Many positive leadership theories assume that dysfunctional leadership is simply the absence or opposite of effective leadership (Lipman–Blumen, 2005; Pelletier, 2010). However, as organizations recognize that some leaders are hostile to employees and peers, they are looking to better understand how the workplace results are affected by these destructive leadership styles.

Of all the destructive leadership styles discussed in existing literature, toxic leadership appears to be the most comprehensive in terms of the number and types of negative behaviors included in the definition (Pelletier, 2010; Hilaluddin *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, toxic leadership can be considered an umbrella term covering many distinct but related dimensions of negative leadership (e.g., workplace bullying, abusive leadership). Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. There are three critical elements of this destructive style of leadership: an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates, a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects the organizational climate, and a belief by subordinates that the superior is motivated primarily by self-interest (Whicker, 1996). Employees experiencing toxic leader behavior may have feelings of helplessness, reduced autonomy, reduced efficiency and innovation, reduced job satisfaction, psychosomatic problems such as anxiety, depression, frustration, and gastrointestinal problems (Fowlie & Wood, 2009; Walton, 2007).

Toxic leadership has existed in organizations and societies for a long time. However, the concept of toxic leadership has not been given due importance in the whole range of leadership theories that exist (Walton, 2007). Toxic leadership not only affects performance at the organizational level but also at the individual level. When focusing on toxicity, many researchers stress the signs of toxicity (i.e., individual characteristics, characteristics) and not the disease (i.e., culture, climate, outcomes) (Pelletier, 2010). Although characteristics and traits may help identify toxic leaders, they fall short of a holistic view by failing to identify or discuss how an organization's culture can contribute to its leaders' toxicity. Culture is a critical strategic factor in predicting behavior and outcomes. An organization's culture may have a moderating effect on its members' behavior and may ultimately serve to promote toxic behavior (Fowlie & Wood, 2009).

This paper aims to critically review and synthesize existing literature on toxic leadership to highlight the evolution of toxic leadership in higher education. This analysis will identify critical organizational insights for senior managers and researchers interested in maintaining a healthy work environment that will increase employee retention and higher education productivity. To better understand the impact of toxic leadership on higher education organizations, Tierney's organizational culture framework is used to organize the literature review themes. The concept of toxic leadership is further explored in discussing findings and juxtaposed with other destructive leadership styles within higher education organizations. Following this, the authors present an analysis of the impact of toxic ship-owners on the elements of organizational culture, employee morale, and performance. Finally, strategies for maintaining macro-and micro-level resilience are presented along with a discussion of relevance, implications, and concluding thoughts.

LITERATUR REVIEW

Tierney (1988) sought to understand better higher education's organizational culture and its importance in improving governance and performance. The culture of an organization is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication at both the instrumental and symbolic level' (p. 3). His research

suggests that using a framework to diagnose organizational culture can improve management decision-making skills when managing organizational change and conflict. Effective decision-making will thus enhance institutional performance. The Tierney Framework (1988) focuses on six elements that determine the organizational culture. Namely: Environment, Mission, Socialization, Information, Strategy, and Leadership.

In this conceptual framework, the environment extends beyond the university's physical environment to include the wider community that the institution serves. An example of how the extended environment affects the institutional environment is when a change in the environment, such as a shortage of nursing professionals in the area, forces a change in university programs to address this shortage. It is also important to note the role of the institutional mission in the organization. Mission statements should be effectively communicated to the constituents and used as a guide for decision-making according to the university's ultimate vision. The socialization of new team members also has an impact on the culture of the organization. New members of the community are formally and informally aware of what it will take to 'fit in.' Fitting in refers to what is socially acceptable or unacceptable within the institution. For example, an institution can demand that all its employees work as a team and that this collaborative culture is established. Individuals who join an institution that displays individualistic attitudes will be less effective and ostracized by their team members.

To gain additional insight into the institution's organizational culture, it is essential to observe how information is used and shared. Information can be used as a power in many institutions and can only be shared with individuals perceived to be in leadership positions. However, more effective organizations use formal and informal means to communicate what is happening at the institution and provide ample opportunity for individuals to come together to foster oral discourse. How this information is shared determines what strategy is used to make decisions. Effective decision-making has been linked to employees' involvement in the process, often referred to as participatory decision-making. Employees who are part of this process often experience buying in and going to great lengths to achieve the goals that have been set at the grassroots level of the organization. Finally, the institution's management styles can reflect the institution's values and thus strengthen the organizational culture. The institutional culture can be explored by understanding how employees define and perceive their environment using their institutional mission and information as strategies, and making decisions as the way employees are socialized within the institution and what they expect from their leaders. After further reflection, it becomes evident that organizational culture can foster or discourage destructive leadership styles within an organization. Therefore, Tierney's organizational culture framework (1988) is used as a conceptual framework for this literature review of toxic leadership in higher education institutions.

METHOD

In order to review and synthesize existing literature on toxic leadership in higher education, the thematic synthesis of Thomas and Harden (2008) was used to review studies published in scientific journals, proceedings of international conferences, symposia, and workshops, as well as books, book chapters, and dissertations as full-length articles written in English. Although the term "toxic leadership" was first introduced in 1996, the first located source of toxic leadership in higher education appeared in 2007. Therefore, a 10-year review of the literature, 2007–2017, is being conducted instead of a 20-year review—the results of our search in increments of two years. The literature search process included the use of key terms (i.e., toxic leadership, destructive leadership, adult harassment, incivility) and the identification of additional publications from the reference section of the sources identified. This method was chosen because this scholarly paper goes beyond identifying critical concepts in the literature by

'bringing together corroborating concepts and going significantly beyond the content of the original studies' (Thomas & Harden, 2008, p. 46).

Thematic synthesis combines and adapts the approaches of both meta-ethnography and grounded theory. Meta-ethnography uses multiple empiric studies, but, unlike meta-analysis, the sample is purposeful rather than exhaustive because the purpose is an interpretive explanation, not a prediction (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This suggests that it may not be necessary to locate all available studies because the conceptual synthesis results will not change if ten studies, rather than five, contain the same concept. Instead, the findings depend on the range of concepts found in the studies, their context, and whether they agree. Therefore, principles such as the objective of conceptual saturation are considered more appropriate for the identification of qualitative studies to be reviewed (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Sensitivity analysis was used to assess the quality study's potential impact on the systemic review findings (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Publications were assessed based on three main criteria: 1) the quality of the reporting of the study's objectives, context, rationale, methods, and findings; 2) the adequacy of the strategies used to determine the reliability and validity of the data collection tools and methods of analysis, and therefore the validity of the findings, and 3) the appropriateness of the study methods to ensure that the findings were made for a description of the method. The empirical basis was derived from 20 sources representing the Western perspective of toxic leadership in higher education. The thematic synthesis approach used to analyze these sources helped to extract key concepts from publications. These key concepts were then arranged and organized according to three emerging themes: organizational culture, employee morality, and performance. The themes were identified following the achievement of conceptual saturation. Each of the 20 sources is presented in alphabetical terms concerning how they relate to emerging themes.

The subject of employee morale is best understood by considering the elements of socialization and information on Tierney. Organizational culture included discussions on the mission and the environment. Performance is aligned with the leadership and strategy components. When used to analyze previous studies, the thematic synthesis methodological approach helps recognize, describe, and analyze similar concepts found in each study to gain additional insight into the topic being investigated. Using this technique, reviewing the literature on toxic leadership in higher education helped the authors identify findings that will inform policy and practice at the college level.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A comprehensive definition of toxic leadership is presented in this section of the article, together with a summary of the key descriptive findings of toxic leadership in higher education. This systemic review results will be outlined based on three themes (i.e., organizational culture, the morale of employees, and performance) derived from the authors' literature analysis and the six-part framework for understanding organizational culture Tierney.

"The literature describing toxic leadership in higher education, like research focused on corporate and military organizations, indicates that a high frequency of toxic leaders can be found in educational institutions (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). In general terms, toxic leadership refers to destructive leadership that includes behaviors of leaders and followers that result in long-term negative results and unhealthy environmental conditions. It differs from incivility and bullying of adults by the extent and level of destruction induced. Most of the incivility research identifies it as insensitive behaviors perpetrated by an individual with a lack of respect for others (Basu, 2012; Scanlon, 2016; Twale & De Luca, 2008). Adult bullying,

however, is characterized as patterns of conduct designed to intimidate (Barrow, 2009; Burgman, 2016; Farley & Sprigg, 2014; Hollis, 2012; Lester, 2012; Nyberg et al., 2009; Zapf and Gross, 2001). On the other hand, toxic leadership includes both intimidation and incivility, further exacerbated by environmental conditions and subordinate complicit behaviors (Cleary, Walter, Andrew, & Jackson, 2013; Veldsman, 2012; Lipman-Bluman, 2005; Whicker, 1996). Within an organization, culture highlights preferred socio-cultural traditions that strengthen or support the mission of an organization. Typically, toxic leadership cases emerge in cultures that exercise collectivism over individualism, avoidance of ambiguity, and power disparity (Powers, Judge, & Makela, 2016; Twale & De Luca, 2008).

Although surprising, toxic leadership is more likely to emerge from collective versus individualistic environments: a collectivist environment is often self-regulated by imposed social rules that put the organization's perceived needs above individual concerns. In contrast, individualistic environments promote assertiveness and independence, which leaves room for the status quo to be called into question. In organizational cultures, toxic leaders thrive, allowing them to be in control of their environment.

Most organizational environments and mission statements emphasize positive attributes of leadership and spousal beliefs that encourage effective leadership (Pelletier, 2010; Veldsman, 2012; Obilor *et al,* 2018; Yunus *et al*., 2020). However, these aspirational concepts can vary from what individuals experience within the organization of higher education. Organizational cultures in which toxic leadership thrives have highly politicized, adversarial, and competitive institutional environments and missions. Although there may be instances of adversarial academic organizations, most cultures that allow toxicity seem to be overly political and competitive (Barrow, 2009; Findlay, Freeman, & Findlay, 2016; Frazier, 2011; Thomas, 2010; Thomas & Thomas, 2008; Twale & DeLuca, 2008). Such organizations are also marked by increasing bureaucracy levels (Frazier, 2011; Kusy & Holloway, 2009). An example of this would be the increased management approval levels required for the smallest of administrative actions (Hollis, 2012; Lester, 2012). The objective of this action and others like it is to increase employee micromanagement.

According to the current literature, another important feature of these organizations is a preference for management and training corporate models (Padilla et al., 2007; Piotrowski & King, 2016). Another essential feature of these organizations is a preference for corporate management and training models. Administrators with stronger business or corporate backgrounds are usually recruited for key leadership roles to fully adapt these models to the higher education system (Farley & Sprigg, 2014; Powers et al., 2016). The outcome ends up being a performance-driven bottom line for educational institutions (Thomas & Thomas, 2010); more emphasis is placed on achieving the mission than on how the mission is accomplished. In other words, individuals within the organization began to be treated as objects needed for the goal, regardless of level, instead of assets that facilitate the achievement of the organizational goal. Our findings point to the fact that organizational culture's role in exacerbating the level of toxicity of destructive leaders in higher education institutions can not be underestimated.

Significance

Toxic leadership damages an organization's culture by violating its legitimate interests and decreasing its members' commitment and motivation. The negative results caused by toxic leaders create lasting and lasting harm to the organization's culture, climate, and people involved. How an organization responds to or takes measures to avoid toxic leadership can

directly impact the degree of harm. Higher education stakeholders can better understand the degree to which institutions are currently affected by this phenomenon by participating in a systemic review of the existing literature discussing this subject. Higher education leaders can potentially moderate behaviors, enhance organizational governance methods, and reduce or eliminate toxic behavior among leaders and subordinates only through critical examination.

The current literature concerning toxic leadership in higher education was critically reviewed and synthesized in this paper. After reviewing the literature, it became clear that toxic leaders are either fostered or eradicated depending on the organization's culture. In organizations that value high performance and have no systems in place that monitor how these goals and objectives are achieved, toxic leaders thrive. The decline of the American economy began in 2008 and has catalyzed higher education institutions to evaluate how they run the higher education business. This evaluation prompted many higher education institutions to adopt a business model that focuses on the bottom line, leading to significant budget cuts (Powers et al., 2016). More leaders being reported as showing toxic leadership behaviors may cause this additional pressure on educational leaders. There has been an increasing interest in underestimating how toxic leadership relates to tertiary education, as shown in Table 1. However, if higher education institutions concentrate solely on what has been accomplished by emphasizing the bottom line rather than how bottom-line thinking has affected organizational culture, employee morale, and performance, destructive leadership styles such as toxic leadership will continue to exist perforate higher education objectives.

CONCLUSION

The connection between performance and job satisfaction has long been established in academic discussions of organizational systems. Hostile work environments, such as those generated by toxic leadership and human capital underdevelopment within organizations, are becoming necessary evaluation and self-study areas. Despite the authors' ability to find 20 sources to use in a systemic literature review, only six of these articles explicitly use the language of toxic leadership in the academy to discuss destructive behaviors. This is a lack of understanding or acceptance of the term toxic leadership in assessing the academy's variety of adverse behaviors, cultures, and environment. The use of widely accepted terminology will enable those within the academy to develop effective best practices and strategies to combat toxic leadership.

Therefore, through scholarship, more intentional reviews of this issue must take place. Studies include several areas that need more immediate attention for future research: examining the semiotics of 'toxic leadership'; exploring the development of toxic leadership behaviors; examining how institutional policies and guidelines promote toxic environments or strengthen toxic leadership behaviors, and measuring the longitudinal effects of toxic leadership on faculty and administrator retention. The lack of empirical research in this area poses a significant challenge to defining toxic leadership in ways relevant to the higher education system and developing strategies to eradicate toxic leadership from the educational institutions' organizational culture.

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