



Impact of Toxic Leadership on Project Success: Experiences and Perspectives

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Abstract

In the age of rapid technological advancements and globalization, effective project management is essential for organizational success. Despite the growing importance of project-based work, challenges remain. One of those challenges is poor leadership. It is identified as a major factor affecting project outcomes. This thesis investigates the prevailing issue of toxic leadership which endangers organizational success and employee well-being.

This research is built upon both theoretical concepts and empirical data gathered using a custom-designed questionnaire. It examines the impact of toxic leadership on project success and professionals' experiences in project environments. The thesis examines negative consequences of toxic behaviours on organizational culture, team dynamics, and project outcomes. The research also investigates coping mechanisms and transformative strategies for addressing toxic leadership, revealing the discrepancy between literature-based recommendations and practical implementation within organizations. Results underline the urgent need for proactive measures to eradicate toxic leadership, since inaction increases employee turnover and restricts organizational effectiveness.

The thesis concludes with recommendations for organizational interventions and guidelines to help people navigate toxic leadership. Ultimately, the research emphasizes the need of fostering healthy work environments where every individual feels respected, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Project Management, Toxic Leadership, Organizational Culture, Leadership Dynamics, Project Success, Workplace Dynamics, Leadership Development

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

N/A

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1 Introduction

We live in the age of rapid technological advancements, globalization, and dynamic changes in work approaches. As we progress forward, the field of project management is becoming increasingly important to organizational success. Prevalent influence of technology has an enormous impact on how projects are carried out. This phenomenon reflects the rapidly changing global landscape of labour systems. Therefore, the effective project management is more critical than ever.

In 2017, the Project Management Institute (PMI) conducted a talent gap analysis, predicting a considerable increase in individuals working in project management-related positions: an estimation of 87.7 million professionals globally is anticipated to be working in the field by 2027 (PMI, 2017). This increase highlights the growth of project-based work with projects becoming essential to organizational strategies. Project success rates have been growing steadily according to PMI Pulse of the Professions reports over the years. According to the 2021 report, 73% of projects met their original targets (PMI, 2021) However, challenges in the project management realm persist. According to the same report, 12% of projects were deemed failures, 35% of all analysed projects are considered to be failed due to budget lost and 34% of projects experienced scope creep (PMI, 2021). Below is graphical representation of the answers to the question *“In your estimation, what percentage of the projects completed within your organization in the past 12 months...”* (PMI, 2021):

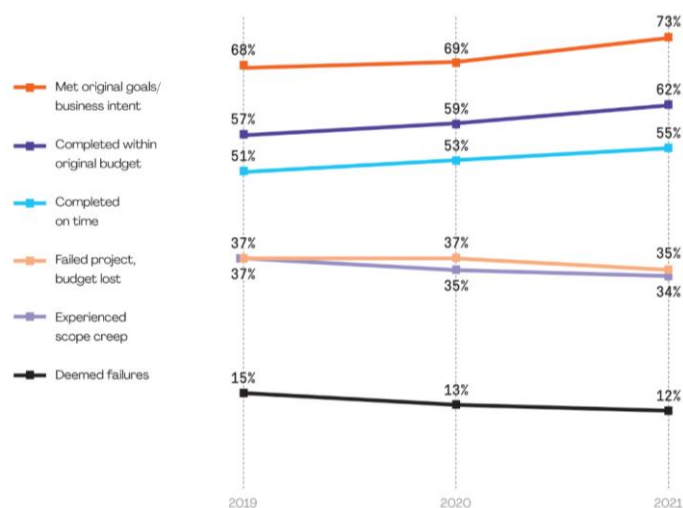


Figure 1. Project success statistics, mean percentages (PMI, 2021)

Failed projects cost organizations billions of dollars and as the amount of project-based work keeps increasing, so will the losses. Additionally, the job growth and talent gap analysis evaluated that the talent gap in project management might result in a shocking potential loss of US\$207.9 billion in GDP by 2027 across 11 analysed countries (PMI, 2017). Therefore, identifying and further mitigating obstacles hindering project success have become critical.

Poor leadership has been identified as one of the major factors affecting project success rates which is supported by various academic studies (Abdullahi, 2017; Nixon et al., 2012; Bhatti et al., 2021; Doan et al., 2020; Saif UR Rehman et al., 2020). Leadership is a constantly developing notion: we live in the radically changing world where leadership, in all its significance for the humankind, undergoes reevaluation and redefinition. This change happens in response of evolving needs, expectations, and overall motivations of the workforce. Leadership and leadership excellence is one of the most fiercely discussed topics of the present time alongside such critical to society challenges as demographic shifts, food and water security, world peace, global warming, and sustainability (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016). It is fair to state that our own future highly depends on the effectiveness and quality of the world's leadership. Therefore, the issue of growing toxic leadership is of immense importance.

Transitioning to the focal point of this thesis, we will dive into the topic of toxic leadership, the prevalent and worrying issue in organizational dynamics. While the positive attributes of leadership are well-known and often discussed, the negative aspects of leadership remain underemphasized. Toxic leaders create toxic organizations. According to Veldsman & Johnson (2016), a toxic organization is an organization undermining and harming physical, psychosocial well-being of its members on purpose, often causing permanent damage. Toxic leadership often characterized by such destructive behaviours as manipulation and abuse of power, poses a significant threat to overall success of the organization, employee well-being and project outcomes.

This thesis will look into several dimensions of toxic leadership including a detailed analysis of diverse forms of toxic leadership behaviours, archetypes of toxic leaders, and interactions between these elements and their influence on organizational dynamics. The following sections will outline

the research questions defined, examine the scope and objectives of this work, and outline methodologies planned to be used to investigate the complexities of toxic leadership in project environments.

1.1 Research Problem, Questions, and Objectives

Understanding how toxic leadership impacts project success is an important topic in the field of project management. The aim of this study is to address the issue by outlining specific research questions and objectives. These elements will guide our comprehensive exploration of the complex dynamics of toxic leadership within project environments.

Research Problem: Our primary focus is understanding the extent and consequences of toxic leadership in project settings, particularly its impact on both project success and the well-being of professionals involved.

In order to address the research problem outlined above, the following research questions have been defined:

- **Research Question 1:** What is the impact of toxic leadership on the success of the project and how is this impact perceived by the professionals working in the project environment?
- **Research Question 2:** What are the coping mechanisms and transformative strategies (and their effectiveness) in addressing the toxic leadership in project environments and/or eradication of organizational toxicity altogether?

Building upon the defined research problem and questions, this study seeks to thoroughly analyse the impact of toxic leadership on project success. Therefore, the **objectives of the thesis** are:

First, the thesis aims to extensively explore the impact of toxic and/or dysfunctional leadership on project success, with a particular interest in the rapidly evolving tech sector. The primary goal is to provide a thorough understanding of how these leadership dynamics manifest and affect project outcomes through the impact on the individuals working in such environments.

At the same time, the research aims to explore potential solutions. Beyond identification and analysis, the study investigates individual coping mechanisms adopted by professionals navigating toxic leadership scenarios. Additionally, it examines organizational strategies designed for eliminating toxic leadership behaviours, the ones that work and the ones that don't.

To summarize, the primary objectives of this thesis involve a comprehensive examination of toxic leadership's impact on project success through employees' well-being (with a particular interest in the expanding tech sector), and an exploration of potential viable solutions.

1.2 Scope and Limitations

This thesis examines project environments, project-based work, and organizational dynamics, emphasizing various leadership styles and challenges unique to project environments. The main focus of this thesis work, utilizing a literature-based research technique, is exploration of toxic leadership, including its symptoms, signs, and types, and strategies for mitigation. Coping mechanisms developed by and for individuals facing toxic leadership will also be examined.

An online questionnaire was used to gather firsthand experiences of toxic leadership and to investigate its predominance and manifestations. Additionally, the survey includes section dedicated to solutions adopted by both employees and organizations with their estimated successfulness.

It is important to note, however, that the voluntary nature of participation introduces a potential for sampling bias, coupled with inherent limitations caused by the online survey format which is further examined in section 6.1 Reliability and ethicality. While the thesis does not enforce concrete industry and/or geographical constraints, the anticipated audience is expected to be predominantly from Finland and from technology field (given the author's engineering background). Additional scope limitations include impossibility to recall participants for a follow-up interview (due to the anonymous nature of the survey for protection of the participants from any repercussions) and lack of control over external factors influencing participants during the survey. Acknowledging these limitations is essential for interpreting results and applying the findings made during this work beyond the surveyed population.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis has a straightforward step-like structure. The work starts with the introduction section where we explain the research problem, why it's significant and relevant for both society and businesses, and what we aim to achieve. Additionally, we define the questions we're trying to answer and what falls within the scope of this study.

The next step is the literature review which covers two main areas:

1. Definition and description of leadership and toxic leadership.
2. Coping methods and strategies to deal with toxic leadership.

The literature review is followed by methodology section outlining the conducted study. The results chapter describes the main findings followed by the discussion chapter where these findings are being interpreted and discussed.

The structure of the thesis work is visualized below:

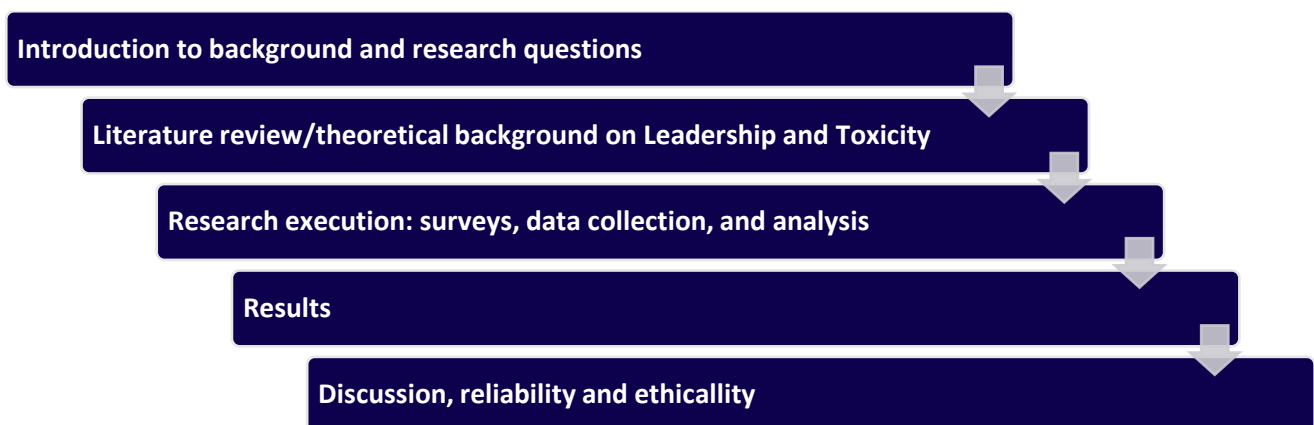


Figure 2. Thesis process

1.4 Information Retrieval and Source Material

The key sources selected for conducting the literature review for this thesis include a range of reliable sources to ensure a comprehensive and well-rounded review of the topic, and they are as follows:

- **Project Management Institute (PMI) website:** A wide selection of articles and study materials is available for PMI members, offering essential insights into project management practices, industry trends and recent statistics.
- **Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK, 7th edition):** PMBOK is a key source of project management foundation information, principals, and best practices.
- **ProQuest, Ebook Central, ScienceDirect:** These academic databases are well-known for their extensive collection of peer-reviewed articles, scholarly publications, and research studies.
- **Google Scholar and ResearchGate:** These databases provide a broader spectrum of academic publications, including articles and conference papers complementing the aforementioned sources.

In addition to more traditional sources of information, I will use more complex tools and methodologies to improve the depth and relevance of the literature study and help in the thesis's implementation:

- **AI-powered tools/platforms and Google search:** Primary idea of utilization of these tools is aiding the search of emerging trends and patterns in project management literature and give valuable insights and tips for data analysis.

For the implementation phase, a survey created with Microsoft Forms software will be published on LinkedIn social networking platform. The data analysis and tabulation of collected answers will be executed with the use of Microsoft Excel.

This combination of resources (established frameworks, academic databases, and even cutting-edge search methods) is highly beneficial for providing well-rounded research and enhancing the understanding of the complexity underlying toxic leadership in project contexts.

2 Theoretical Foundations of Project Leadership

2.1 Project: Definition, Terminology, and Recent Trends

This section of the thesis creates a foundation for understanding the dynamics within projects and investigates recent trends in the field. The primary goal is to develop a thorough understanding of project definitions, present essential terminology, and assess the current project environment.

Defining a project is critical for building a shared understanding, as is comprehending project terminology to establish a common language. Researching the recent trends in projects is important to understand the current challenges and advancements in the field especially considering the dynamic nature of technology.

2.1.1 Definition of a Project

Projects play a crucial role in today's business environment, and nearly all organizations are involved in various project activities. The influence of project-based work has spread across different industries from construction and engineering to information technology, and healthcare. Despite the enormous differences in these fields, projects share key elements: need in effective planning, careful execution, diligent monitoring, and organized closure. (Olson, 2020)

In the realm of project management, a project can be defined as a "*a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result*" (PMI, 2021). This definition emphasizes the temporary nature (with defined beginning and end and, therefore, scope and resources) and distinctiveness inherent in projects.

Projects vary in shapes and sizes. They can vary based on, for instance, the number of people involved, the diversity of skills required for it to happen or even level of uncertainty. Some projects are individual endeavours, while others, such as big-scale military campaigns, involve a great number of participants. Predicting the time necessary for new projects is intrinsically difficult, resulting in differences between early estimates and actual schedules. All these aspects have a large impact on complexity of the project (Olson, 2020).

Project-based work provides multitude of benefits to organizations. It offers a structured, goal-oriented approach that improves efficiency, promotes innovation, and enables quick response to changing circumstances. In its essence, project-based work is a dynamic and rewarding approach that fosters creativity and aids in the growth of both individuals and organizations.

Project Management is a dynamic, constantly evolving field operating within several well-defined frameworks with various tools and methodologies. Its dynamic nature is essential to meet the demands of modern projects. However, while there is a clear emphasis on methodologies and techniques, the human aspect remains in the shadows. The success or failure of a project is strongly tied to the individuals involved—their skills, mindset, and ability to navigate challenges. It is crucial to recognize and address the human aspect in order to achieve the highest potential of project success.

2.1.2 Recent Trends in Project Environments

Over the last decade, our world has undergone enormous transformations. These changes prompted organizations to transition from tactical to strategic management, include strategic cultural considerations into decision-making, and emphasize the importance of critical thinking skills for success (Spina & Spina, 2020). This development is evident in project management field, where the focus has transitioned from purely technical (hard) skills to power (soft) skills. PMI's awareness of this shift is also visible in the changes from the 6th to the 7th edition of the PMBOK guide.

According to the "Pulse of the Profession 2023" report (PMI, 2023) and the survey conducted for it, today project professionals prioritize power skills such as communication, problem-solving, collaborative leadership, and strategic thinking. However, despite growing recognition of significance of power skills, it was stated in the same report that "talent decision-makers" allocate only 25% of their annual training and development budget to these skills, while 51% is dedicated to technical skills like agile practices and collaboration tools. This distribution has been further aligned with responses from project professionals where 46% of professional development hours were allocated to technical skills and only 29% to power skills. Furthermore, 47% of project professionals reported that power skills were not mentioned during recruiting or promotion.

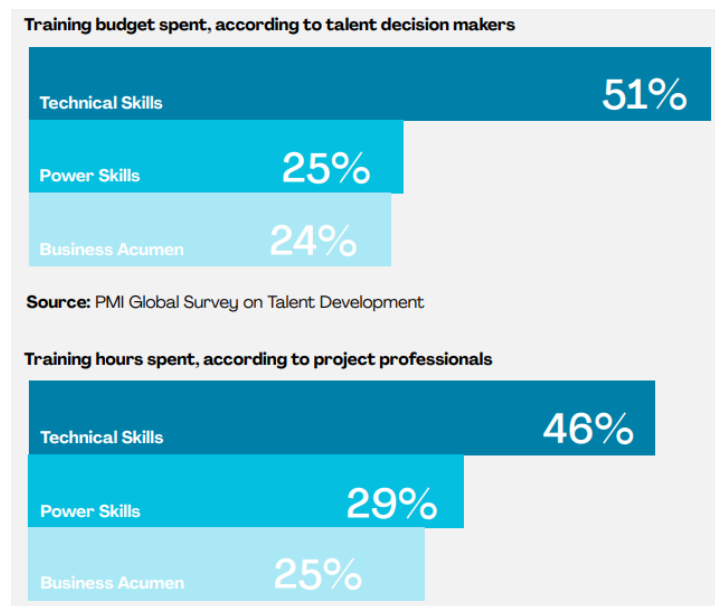


Figure 3. Allocation of training budget: technical skills versus power skills (PMI, Pulse of the profession® 2023, 14th Edition, 2023)

The rapid changes in the current technological landscape, particularly the widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI), have further impacted the field of project management. For instance, AI's application in risk management, including the development of probability occurrence models, risk scoring, and risk priority models, demonstrates its transformational power (Addo, Centhala, & Shanmugam, 2020).

The modern project landscape faces dynamic challenges driven by increasing customer demands and fiercer competition (Tolbert & Parente, 2020). Organizations must adapt to survive, which leads to the development of new tools and methodologies. One of the notable developments is agile project management methodologies. Already in 2017, 71% of surveyed companies reported using agile methods "always", "often" or "sometimes" (PMI, 2017). Favourably, one of the core principles of Agile PM coming all the way from original Agile manifesto is prioritizing people and interactions over processes and tools - "people first" (Ambler & Lines, 2022).

However, a fundamental question arises: are project-based environments saviours or villains when it comes to toxic leadership? While toxic leadership behaviours are easily imaginable in traditional hierarchical organizations with pronounced power imbalances, how they manifest in project environments remains a question.

2.2 Leadership Dynamics in Projects

The importance of effective leadership for the success of project delivery was highlighted in the previous chapters. Leading in a project environment is more challenging than traditional organizational leadership. The temporary and limited nature of project employee bonds has a direct impact on the relevance of leadership styles and personality traits, making their understanding vital for project success (Owusu & Ochil, 2023).

Before deep diving into the intricacies of leadership styles and characteristics, it is important to establish the definition of leadership. According to Walker & Aritz (2014), leadership can be defined as "*the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of goals*". In project management, where adaptability is essential, leadership dynamics explore how leaders interact with team members.

Recognizing the importance of leadership dynamics is vital in the context of projects. This section of the thesis focuses on identifying different aspects of leadership in projects, various leadership styles used, how leadership influences how teams collaborate, and special challenges leaders face in projects.

2.2.1 Styles of Leadership

Leadership in projects comes in a variety of forms that influence team dynamics and project outcomes. Examining different leadership styles is important for understanding how leaders guide and engage with their teams.

One challenge in addressing management and leadership is the prevalent bias in today's business literature, often favouring white, male, Western perspectives. B. Allan, the author of "*The No-Non-sense Guide to Leadership, Management and Teamwork*" (2019) has investigated different research works by other writers which include the viewpoints of women and individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. Drawing on B. Allan (2019) and C. Margules' (2011) studies on leadership, this thesis will further examine the following leadership styles: transformational, affiliative, participative, coaching, pacesetter, directive, and situational.

The Transformational (Visionary) Leadership Style

The transformational leadership style focuses on creating a shared, long-term direction by means of collaboration and persuasive communication. It involves developing a clear vision, seeking others' perspectives, and emphasizing "selling the vision" by explaining the "whys" behind it. This style is effective for goal communication and onboarding and requires a credible leader devoted to team development. This style contrasts with transactional leadership, which uses rewards and punishments to achieve goals within the existing organizational culture.

The Affiliative Leadership Style

The affiliative leadership style aims to promote harmony by connecting people and fostering positive interactions within a team. It focuses on meeting human needs, giving positive feedback, and prioritizing personal traits above task performance. This style is effective for improving team relationships, boosting morale during stress, and rebuilding trust. However, it may avoid addressing performance issues directly. Ideal situations for its application include resolving conflicts, motivating during stress, and strengthening connections.

The Participative Leadership Style

The participative leadership style seeks to foster commitment and develop new ideas by valuing input and encouraging participation of all team members trusting them to contribute to decision-making and goal development. This style emphasizes good listening while also utilizing emotional intelligence skills including teamwork, conflict resolution, and influence. Participative leaders seek agreement by conducting frequent meetings and taking into consideration all concerns. The ideal situations for applying this style include competent teams that need coordination.

The Coaching Leadership Style

The coaching leadership style focuses on people's long-term professional development by alignment of personal aspirations with organizational goals. It guides team members in identifying strengths, weaknesses, and establishing development goals. This style emphasizes continuous training and

feedback while potentially prioritizing long-term development over immediate performance goals. It is best to avoid this style in crises, when there is a lack of expertise, or when team members require excessive development.

The Pacesetting Leadership Style

The pacesetting leadership style aims to complete tasks at a high level of excellence by setting challenging goals and leading by example with high expectations. This style is characterized by a reluctance to delegate, taking responsibility if high performance is lacking, and giving explicit instructions throughout challenging situations. While it can be effective with a motivated and competent team, bad execution may leave team members feeling pressured, unsure about guidelines, and generally demoralized.

The Directive Leadership Style

The directive leadership style prioritizes swift compliance by providing clear direction. It is especially effective in crises or for straightforward tasks. This style aims to provide instructions rather than guidance and relies on corrective feedback. It can be useful, but excessive usage can be harmful. The directive style is most effective when paired with other tactics and is appropriate for initiating a turnaround, dealing with difficult team members, or managing a crisis.

The Authoritarian Leadership Style

The authoritarian leadership style is distinguished by a strong hierarchical structure where the leader holds authority and makes decisions without notable team input. This approach prioritizes efficiency but can affect creativity and team engagement. Communication is often top-down, and success is determined by nature of the task and team competence. Leaders adopting this style must balance assertiveness and openness for optimal team productivity.

The Situational Leadership Style

The situational leadership style is perhaps the most dynamic. It is centered on leaders selecting the most appropriate approach based on the situation. This style recognizes the importance of aligning leadership with the task and context. There is no "one-size-fits-all" or "silver bullet" type of solution. When team members understand the rationale behind a certain leadership style, they are more likely to follow their leader. However, misunderstanding might arise if leadership approaches look inconsistent.

2.2.2 Impact of Leadership on Team Dynamics

Understanding how teams work within a project is essential, and leadership plays an important role in shaping the team dynamics. Whyte, et al. (2022) proposed a term of "socialized leadership" which differs from traditional hierarchical approaches. It represents a transition towards a collaborative approach where leadership focuses on empowering everyone involved in the project rather than concentrating the power in the hands of a single individual. Effective leaders foster an environment where team members feel encouraged to share ideas and thoughts. This collaborative approach is critical for overcoming problems arising in modern projects, especially those involving complex technologies, organizational intricacies, and environmental considerations (Whyte, et al., 2022).

Motivation and engagement are vital aspects of team dynamics influenced by leadership. Luo et al.'s (2022) study explores various leadership styles and their impacts on project success. Adaptive leaders, adept at navigating changes, emerge as pivotal figures for project success, particularly in complex situations.

Leadership has a significant impact on team's *motivation and engagement*. Adaptive leaders, who can navigate changes, emerge as crucial figures for project success, especially in complex situations (Luo, Zhang, Zheng, & Wu, 2022). *Trust* serves as the foundation for strong team dynamics. Leaders may use emotional intelligence to help develop trust within a team. Leaders who understand and manage their emotions effectively, while also understanding the emotions of their team members, are better able to handle conflicts and establish a *positive team environment*.

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that leadership may also have a negative influence on team dynamics. For instance, leadership styles in which one person maintains strict and utter control can reduce collaboration, creativity, and innovation. Micromanagement, a known leadership pitfall, can destroy trust and demotivate team members. Whyte et al. (2022) discuss possible negative impacts of leadership focusing on the challenges created by a rapidly changing world. When leadership fails to adapt to changing circumstances, there is a risk of creating a less inclusive and less resilient team dynamic. Rigidity leadership styles may hinder the essential agility required in the face of technological developments, organizational complexities, and environmental concerns.

2.2.3 Challenges in Leadership within Project Environments

Navigating the complexities of project environments requires robust leadership skills as many varied challenges arise. Unforeseen obstacles, technological advancements, and organizational shifts are common in the realm of adaptive leadership (Whyte, et al., 2022). Leaders play a critical role in encouraging collaborative contributions and empowering team members to manage evolving project landscapes (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016).

Stakeholder management is a fundamental challenge for leaders within project environments. The varied needs and interests of multiple stakeholders require leaders to understand and address these complexities in a balanced, fair, and equitable manner. This task demands effective communication and the cultivation of goodwill which is regarded as a manifestation of social capital which further empowers leaders to pursue long-term visions, fostering trust and empowerment among stakeholders (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016). The most pressing concerns are how genuine and trustworthy leadership originates, how stakeholders support it, and how it builds a strong action community.

Leaders have additional challenges due to communication issues. Effective communication is important in managing stakeholders' expectations and varied viewpoints (Luo, Zhang, Zheng, & Wu, 2022). Leaders must clearly express their vision, plans, and choices in order to gain and maintain the trust and support of stakeholders. Furthermore, transparency in decision-making processes is paramount for obtaining and preserving credibility, resulting in a positive project environment.

Resource management is another challenge in leadership within project environments. Optimizing the allocation of resources to accomplish project objectives efficiently is a challenging task (Luo,

Zhang, Zheng, & Wu, 2022). Leaders continually struggle with budget constraints, time limitations, and the need to allocate skilled personnel effectively.

Maintaining a balance between autonomy and guidance is another complex challenge to face. Team members need the autonomy to innovate and contribute their expertise, but guidance is essential to ensure alignment with project goals (Whyte, et al., 2022). Leaders must maintain a delicate balance between encouraging innovation and adhering to the project's broader objective.

To summarize, project-based leadership presents several challenges. Stakeholder management, effective communication, resource management, and balancing autonomy with guidance are some of the key (but not the only) challenges. Leaders must manage these complexities to foster goodwill, build trust, and steer project teams toward resilience, success, and the realization of long-term visions.

3 Toxic Leadership: Understanding Traits, Behaviors, and Impact

The dynamic nature of the modern ever-changing and progressive world requires a critical re-evaluation of leadership to fulfil emerging needs. Toxicity of the leadership is a major concern: toxic leaders create harmful organizations causing lasting harm to the well-being of employees.

Defining toxic leadership goes beyond setting a formal definition or description. To understand the lived reality of people subjected to toxic leadership, we need to examine the key characteristics and behaviours of toxic leaders. These key traits include aberrant behaviour, abuse of power, egocentrism, emotional dysregulation, ineffectiveness, and moral corruption. Toxic behaviours can also be categorized into shaming, passive hostility, and team sabotage. Grouping of the toxic traits and behaviours introduces the concept of toxic leader archetypes. Understanding and promptly identifying these toxic leadership behaviours are essential in addressing their negative impact.

This section highlights the diverse nature of toxic leadership and touches upon the consequences it can bring to the organizations and employee well-being. Recognizing toxic behaviours, promptly addressing them, understanding the archetypes are critical steps on the path of eradication of toxic leadership and creating healthier dynamics in today's evolving professional landscape.

3.1 Defining Toxic Leadership

We can find many definitions of toxic leadership in the literature, here are two of them as examples:

- “Toxic leadership is a type of leadership that is destructive to members of a team, an organization, and society at large” (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).
- “Toxic leadership refers to ongoing, deliberate, intentional actions by a leader or leadership to undermine the sense of dignity, self-worth and efficacy of an individual, resulting in destructive, devaluing and demeaning work experiences” (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016).

But are these definitions enough to grasp the concept and to illustrate what toxic leadership is or how does it feel for people involved?

An in-depth understanding of toxic leadership requires going beyond definitions, as demonstrated by Gandolfi & Stone (2022) and Veldsman & Johnson (2016). Alma Ortega's research (2017) within academic libraries provides valuable insights. Toxic leadership does not manifest itself in isolated incidents but as a persistent series of intentional actions aimed to undermine individuals. According to Ortega, this constant degradation has long-term consequences that remain even after the toxic leader has left.

Typical characteristic and exhibited behaviours of toxic leaders will be further examined in the forthcoming sections to give a comprehensive description of the toxic leadership.

3.2 Toxic Leader Profile

As previously discussed, characterizing toxic leadership extends beyond standard definitions. Toxic leadership does not just happen; it is a product of specific individuals. Therefore, understanding who these toxic leaders are, as well as their actions and traits, is crucial. Furthermore, prior chapters highlighted the impact of leadership on team dynamics, making it critical to understand how toxic leaders effect teams.

This section closely examines toxic leader profiles, focusing on their behaviours and archetypes. The goal is to reveal the complex dynamics present in toxic leadership scenarios and clarify how these toxic traits manifest.

3.2.1 Behaviours and Characteristics

Leadership behaviours can have a paramount impact on organizational dynamics and toxic leadership is a major concern. It is important to understand different types of behaviours leaders can exhibit to identify those of toxic nature. Drawing insights from Watkins & Walker (2021) and Veldsman & Johnson (2016), toxic leadership manifests in various forms:

- **Aberrant behaviour**, marked by a combination of positive traits like confidence and negative traits such as a strong urge for power, manipulations, and lack of empathy, can create an initial positive impression but may not be sustainable in the long term.
- **Abuse of power** involves mistreatment and degradation of employees, resulting from leaders misusing their authority (for instance, putting down employees), which can lead to conflicts among colleagues.
- **Egocentric leaders**, particularly those who are greedy and selfish, contribute to a negative organizational environment, negatively impacting employee well-being and creativity, and reducing employee self-worth.
- **Emotional Dysregulation** is characterized by lack of emotional intelligence (including inability to show empathy or regulate emotions) and can result in a fearful work environment and high turnover rates.
- **Leadership ineffectiveness** includes traits such as micromanagement, blame, and unrealistic goal setting and contributes to toxic organizational cultures with low morale and job dissatisfaction.
- **Moral corruption**, involving unethical conduct such as lying, bullying, corruption, and the use of fear to influence others, represents one of the darkest forms of toxic leadership.

Additionally, research by Kusy & Holloway (2019) classifies toxic behaviours into shaming, passive hostility, and team sabotage, aligning with similar characteristics highlighted by Watkins & Walker (2021). Despite different classification, emphasized characteristics of toxic leadership have remained consistent across both studies.

3.2.2 Toxic Leader Archetypes

Leaders with toxic traits consistently demonstrate distinctive behavioural patterns, which can be grouped into specific toxic leader archetypes (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016). These archetypes, as defined in the literature, give a thorough framework for understanding the complexities of negative leadership.

For instance, the "**Cold Fish**" archetype has a distinctive philosophy where only the end result matters, justifying even morally questionable means of getting there. This archetype is characterized by such dominant toxic traits as a lack of integrity, devaluing behaviour, and coerciveness.

The "**Snake**" archetype is characterized by a leader who thrives on manipulation and exploitation to satisfy personal needs and gains. Dominant toxic traits of this archetype include manipulation, exploitation, egocentrism, and a self-serving attitude. In contrast, "**Glory Seeker**" archetype seeks personal fame and visibility at any cost, often displaying demeaning behaviour, egocentrism, unpredictability, inconsistency, and a lack of integrity.

The archetype of the "**Puppet Master**" or "**Power Monger**" seeks absolute control over anyone and/or anything in any circumstance, employing tactics like being aloof or distant, excessive control, and manipulations. Lastly, the "**Monarch**" archetype acts as if everything is their kingdom where all the resources are undoubtedly available for the leader's personal use. Dominant toxic traits are egocentrism, exploitation, coerciveness, self-serving, manipulations.

When insights from these archetypes are combined, it is clear that toxic leaders exhibit consistent behavioural patterns (Veldsman & Johnson, 2016). Moreover, similar concepts of archetypes can be applied to toxic organizations in general, where institutionalized toxic behaviour get integrated into the organizational fabric, shaping its policies, structures, systems, and culture. Understanding these toxic organizational and individual archetypes is crucial for addressing the workplace toxicity more effectively and in timely manner.

3.2.3 Dynamics of Toxic Leadership

Leaders have a significant impact on team dynamics, defining the very fabric of collaboration and productivity (Whyte, et al., 2022). As discussed earlier ([Chapter 2.2.2](#)), effective leadership encourages collaboration, empowers team members, and fosters an environment where ideas flow freely which is critical for modern project challenges.

Toxic leadership creates a striking contrast, distorting team dynamics through intentional behaviours with negative consequences. Toxic leaders use coercive tools like fear and exhaustion, deeply embedding destructive patterns into the organizational fabric (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Driven by self-interest, toxic leaders engage in manipulative tactics to exploit team members' vulnerabilities. The toxic environment they create damages trust, hinders creativity, and inflicts emotional and mental exhaustion on team members (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).

The intentional use of fear as a leadership tool creates disciplinary and punitive relationships within the team. In today's toxic leadership environment, exhaustion is also used as a deliberate strategy. Moreover, toxic leaders may utilize familial and paternalistic dysfunctional behaviours to manipulate followers, using personal experiences and emotions to achieve desired outcomes (Winn & Dykes, 2019).

To summarize, toxic leadership is the intentional creation of conditions that foster fear, exhaustion, and misuse of interpersonal connections. Understanding these dynamics is vital for identifying toxic leaders, recognizing toxic situations, and encouraging healthy team dynamics in the face of toxic leadership issues.

3.3 Impact of Toxic Leadership

Examining the effects of toxic leadership uncovers profound implications for individuals as well as organizations. This section explores the consequences on personal and organizational experiences, as well as their impact on performance and retention, with a particular emphasis on project-based work environments. Special attention is paid to the broader consequences of toxic leadership in the workplace and correlation between toxic leadership, as well as employee turnover which has significant financial implications for organizations.

3.3.1 Individual and Team Implications

Toxic leadership has profound consequences for individuals and teams overall. The behaviours and characteristics of toxic leaders have a negative impact on both individual well-being and team dynamics (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).

Individuals subjected to toxic leadership experience emotional and psychological distress. Fear-based relationships created by toxic leaders foster an environment where employees face intense mental, emotional, and even physical pressure, hindering personal development and often resulting in severe consequences, including emotional exhaustion and burnout (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Toxic leaders' characteristics and behaviours affect employees' anxiety levels, psychological needs, and fear of change, resulting in them experiencing physical and mental health issues (Webster, Brough, & Daly, 2014). The consequences for followers' mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being can be severe and irreversible (Fitzgibbons, 2018).

Moreover, toxic leaders use dishonest strategies to manipulate and force followers which increases the compound impact on other employees. The misuse of personal experiences and emotions leads to dysfunctional relationships, in which followers of toxic leaders may feel obligated to meet the demands in exchange for a sense of comfort and security (Winn & Dykes, 2019). This type of maternalistic or paternalistic behaviour contributes to followers' emotional distress (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). The consequences for individuals spread beyond their professional life affecting employees' family relationships and interactions. This impact can result in depression, psychological distress, and anxiety for employees, impacting their overall well-being (Keller, 2023).

At the team level, toxic leadership disrupts the collaborative dynamics that are critical to organizational success. Toxic leaders create an environment of fear, duress, and demoralization, which causes employees to remain silent within the organization. The implications include decreased collaboration, lower emotional commitment, and increased turnover rates among team members (Fitzgibbons, 2018). The team experiences a breakdown in communication, collaboration, and overall effectiveness.

Toxic leadership has serious implications for individuals, affecting their mental health, career satisfaction, and personal relationships. These individual consequences cascade to affect team relationships, resulting in a toxic work environment with lasting consequences for both individuals and the team as a whole.

3.3.2 Organizational Implications

Toxic leadership has significant organizational implications. Toxic leaders, who often use an authoritarian leadership style, contribute to the creation of a demoralizing culture within organizations (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). This culture can be characterized by a lack of trust and impeded growth and contradicts the core of effective leadership.

One significant consequence of toxic leadership is the loss of psychological safety within the organization (Viscuso, 2018). Toxic work environments compromise psychological safety, which is critical for developing effective teams. Additionally, toxic leadership restricts organizational learning and growth (Saquib & Arif, 2017). The toxic dynamic creates a counterproductive environment which prevents the achievement of organizational goals. Toor and Ogunlana (2009) point out that toxic leaders become driven by power over time leading to behaviours such as abuse of power, narcissism, and coercion. This repetitive or loop type of pattern of toxic behaviour destroys relationships, trust, and organizational effectiveness.

The consequences of toxic leadership are not only psychological but also financial. The annual cost of toxic leadership is estimated to be billions of dollars (Fitzgibbons, 2018). Toxic leadership affects absenteeism, turnover, and overall organizational dysfunction. Organizations must understand the potential financial strain and tension caused by toxic leaders and take proactive measures to address and mitigate these negative consequences.

Toxic leadership has wide-ranging consequences for organizations, including culture, learning, and overall performance. Recognizing and addressing toxic leadership is vital for organizations which want to foster a positive and resilient work environment that leads to continued success and growth.

3.3.3 Impact on Performance and Retention

Toxic work environments known for narcissistic and unethical leadership behaviours have severe implications for organizational performance and employee retention. Managers have a profound impact on work environment: according to SHRM press release (2019) 76% of surveyed respondents believe that their manager set the culture of the team while 36% believed that their manager does not have the necessary knowledge to lead it. Employees seeking to fulfil their basic needs may turn to unhealthy means increasing toxicity and causing workplace disruptions (Keller, 2023). Toxic leaders, particularly those with narcissistic traits, prioritize personal interests over organizational goals, and their win-at-all-costs attitude and refusal to share credit contribute to lower productivity and retention issues, making them a significant factor in toxic work environments (Jiang, gu, & Tang, 2019).

Toxic workplaces affect external stakeholders such as consumers, vendors, and other business partners (Jiang, gu, & Tang, 2019). Longer-tenured employees may develop toxic behaviours over time, highlighting the importance of continuous soft skills training to prevent the negative consequences of workplace toxicity (Jiang, gu, & Tang, 2019). Toxic behaviours such as workplace bullying, contributes to increased employee anxiety, stress, and depression, causing talented individuals to seek employment elsewhere (Jiang et al., 2019; SHRM, 2019).

Toxic environments foster risk-averse behaviour which hinders organizational progress and creativity (Jiang, gu, & Tang, 2019). Employees who are concerned about losing their jobs are less likely to take calculated risks required for innovation and growth, resulting in organizational stagnation. This fear of taking risks restricts creative problem-solving and the development of new products, both of which are crucial to organizational growth and success.

Operational costs increase in toxic work environments, reducing both individual and organizational productivity. Toxic workers may seem productive on the surface but have a significant negative impact on overall productivity and employee morale (Houseman & Minor, 2015). The negative impact is not limited to the victim of toxicity but spreads throughout the organization. Avoiding toxic employees or terminating their employment saves more money in the long run than any short-term benefits (Houseman & Minor, 2015).

Addressing toxic behaviour, implementing effective policies, and fostering a healthy work-life balance are essential steps organizations must take to mitigate the negative impacts of toxic leadership and promote a positive workplace culture. Fortunately, social media has made it difficult for organizations to cover toxic workplace cultures: networking platforms (e.g., Glassdoor) allow potential employees to learn about the workplace culture through reviews, creating a recruitment risk for organizations with toxic environments (Keller, 2023).

4 Response Mechanisms to Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership creates significant challenges for both individuals and organizations. Effectively addressing these challenges requires a thorough understanding from both individual and organizational standpoints. Moreover, it is essential to examine approaches that are ineffective against toxic leadership. It can provide important insights helping to develop more targeted and successful methods to eliminate toxic leadership.

Recognizing the natural resistance to change is vital. People tend to resist both positive and negative changes, underscoring the importance of understanding this resistance. This section will explore the layers of resistance, providing in-sights on how to overcome it and facilitate a smoother transition toward healthier work environments.

Lastly, this section focuses on fostering a positive work environment. Beyond addressing the negative effects of toxic leadership, understanding how to create a positive work environment is fundamental. This involves examining successful initiatives and drawing academic insights to create workplaces that not only withstand toxic influences but also thrive.

4.1 Employee Strategies and Initiatives

Navigating a toxic workplace requires an integrated approach that combines individual coping skills with collaborative efforts to create a supportive environment. Some strategies are designed for individuals to cope on their own, while others require getting support from colleagues. This section examines several personal coping and team-based initiatives that complement one another and contribute to the development of a holistic approach to address and overcome workplace toxicity.

4.1.1 Individual Coping Strategies

Individuals who work in a toxic work environment may seek help through a variety of coping strategies. These personal initiatives aim to reduce stress, improve well-being, and promote a healthier mindset. The following section explores key individual coping strategies, drawing insights from a variety of scholarly sources.

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques can help employees disengage from work-related pressures. Keller (2023) suggests that activities such as listening to music, meditation, outdoor walks, and volunteering for personal causes can significantly contribute to stress reduction. These techniques help to counteract to the negative emotions associated with a toxic workplace.

Work-Life Balance

Maintaining a good work-life balance is vital, especially in environments where toxicity is present. Zadow et al. (2021) underline the challenge of separating work and personal life, especially for employees working remotely. Employees may improve this balance by setting clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives, applying strict time limitations on work-related activities, and actively disengaging from work-related duties at the end of the day. These measures aim to establish a distinct separation, promoting a more fulfilling personal life and mitigating the negative impact of workplace toxicity.

Physical Exercise

Regular physical exercise is an effective coping strategy. Exercise does not only decrease work-induced stress but also positively affects overall mental and physical health (Keller, 2023). Incorporating physical activity into one's daily routine is a proactive way to improve resilience and well-being in the face of challenging work environments.

Seeking Support

Actively seeking both therapeutic and general support is a common coping strategy. Employees may seek support from friends, co-workers, leaders, or human resource departments (Morris, 2019). This strategy involves communication and reporting toxic behaviours to relevant authorities. Professional assistance through therapy provides a structured platform for employees to manage stress, develop mindfulness, and build coping mechanisms (Keller, 2023).

Avoidance

Avoidance is a passive coping strategy in which interaction with a toxic leader is reduced or fully eliminated. Individuals seek emotional distance by withdrawing or suppressing feelings to create emotional distance and minimize the risk of conflict or recurring toxic events. The key to success of avoidance is the ability to create a protective barrier, allowing individuals to avoid confrontation (Morris, 2019).

Assertiveness

Assertiveness includes directly confronting toxic leaders about their conduct and thus providing immediate feedback. Individuals who use assertiveness actively reject or contradict the toxic leader's actions which can promote a shift in behaviour through clear communication (Morris, 2019). This strategy has a potential to stop bullying or toxic behaviour from the start; however, caution is necessary as it also may escalate conflicts, leading to higher occurrences of toxicity.

These individual coping strategies offer employees a toolset for navigate the complexities of toxic work environments. Individuals can enhance resilience and maintain positive outlook in tough professional settings through personal activities, boundary-setting, physical well-being, speaking-up, asking for help or therapeutic interventions.

4.1.2 Strategies to Support Colleagues

Supporting colleagues becomes critical for fostering a positive workplace environment when dealing with toxic leadership. Individuals can use a variety of strategies to encourage and support their peers, resulting in a healthier and more resilient team dynamic.

Peer Appreciation and Development Encouragement

Expressing gratitude and appreciation to coworkers helps tremendously in fostering a tremendously in creating a positive work environment. Recognizing and acknowledging their work improves morale and develops a sense of community (Anjum, Ming, Siddiqi, & Rasool, 2018). Success of this strategy comes from consistently uplifting peers, contributing to improved team dynamics and overall job satisfaction. Supporting colleagues in their professional development by giving constructive feedback, mentoring, and providing needed resources can stimulate skill enhancement and boost confidence while also empowering individuals to overcome challenges in toxic work environments (Rasool, 2021).

Assisting with Work-Life Balance

Collaboratively promoting work-life balance supports colleagues facing challenges in toxic work environments. This easy coping strategy can be incredibly difficult to implement under stress, and therefore peer support can help. Sharing responsibilities, encouraging breaks, and respecting personal time contribute to a healthier workplace culture (Keller, 2023).

Conflict Mediation

Acting as a mediator in workplace conflicts can help colleagues in navigate and resolve disputes. Mediation can prevent or minimize escalation and promote open communication, resulting in more positive work environment (Rasool, 2021). Success of this strategy is primarily dependent on effective communication skills, neutrality, and a commitment to fostering a positive workplace culture.

Peer Support Groups

Forming peer support groups allows colleagues to share their experiences and coping skills. These groups offer emotional support and solidarity, mitigating the impact of toxic work environments (Morris, 2019). Success is dependent on the confidentiality and trust within the support group, which creates an environment for open communication and mutual help.

Actively supporting colleagues through strategies like peer appreciation, conflict mediation, and work-life balance assistance, improves the overall well-being of the workplace. By fostering open communication, teamwork, and professional development, individuals contribute to creating a positive work environment, mitigating the negative consequences of toxicity.

4.2 Organizational Initiatives

In the fight against workplace toxicity, it is essential to acknowledge that coping strategies used by individuals and teams, while significant, are not sufficient to make drastic changes. To achieve lasting results and complete toxicity elimination requires a comprehensive approach that combines bottom-up efforts with top-down organizational interventions.

The Toxicity Offset and Counterbalance System (TOCS) model is a useful framework for understanding and executing organizational changes (Kusy & Holloway, 2019). This model emphasizes the need for a multifaceted approach involving organizational, team, and individual levels. By adopting such a model, organizations can coordinate unified efforts to combat toxicity effectively.

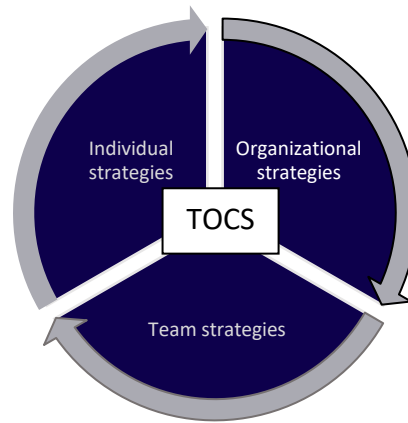


Figure 4. TOCS model visualization

Building on the insights from studies of Morris (2019) and Kusy & Holloway (2019), a common and effective technique for reducing workplace toxicity is to use organizational policies and processes. These strategies, discussed below, provide a foundation for shaping a positive workplace culture, setting expectations, and aligning behaviours with the organization's core values:

- **Organizational Policies:** Establishing clear and well-defined policies based on organizational values provides a robust framework for acceptable behaviour in the organization. These policies guide employees and offer a roadmap to manage professional conduct within the organization.
- **Performance Appraisal:** Developing performance assessment systems with integrated organizational values ensures that employees are evaluated based on their commitment to these values. This approach recognizes and reinforces positive behaviour while also communicates the organization's commitment to its core values.
- **Leadership Development:** Integrating organizational values in leadership development programs creates well-trained leaders who contribute significantly to fostering a positive and ethical organizational culture.
- **360-Degree Feedback Systems:** Collecting input from various stakeholders provides a thorough understanding of how well organizational values are being upheld at different levels, enabling a nuanced assessment of the organizational environment.

- **Skip-Level Evaluations:** When leaders engage with employees at levels beyond their direct reports, they can gain valuable insights into the organizational environment. It creates a connection between leadership and employees providing opportunity for direct feedback or asking for help.

These organizational strategies are most effective when combined with individual and team strategies into a holistic approach. It is vital to underline that organizational interventions should supplement individual efforts of members of the leadership team. Only through this joint effort organizations can eradicate toxicity and foster a healthier workplace environment.

4.3 Identifying Ineffective Strategies

The effectiveness of workplace toxicity strategies varies significantly. Surprisingly, it proved difficult to find thorough examination of ineffective strategies in scholarly literature. This gap emphasizes the importance of analysing strategies that may fail when used inappropriately or lack contextual suitability. Therefore, this section cautiously examines typical ineffective strategies, drawing insights from the research of Morris (2019), Kusy & Holloway (2019), and Keller (Keller, 2023).

One of the most evident ineffective strategies is to ignore the issue at hand, whether consciously or unconsciously. The "**do nothing**" approach seems to be convenient in the short term but allows toxicity to persist and infect the work environment, resulting in long-term consequences (Morris, 2019).

Another strategy that is prone to ineffectiveness is the use of "**avoidance**" strategies. While staying away from toxic individuals could bring temporary relief, it does not address the root causes of toxicity and may contribute to a culture of fear and silence (Keller, 2023; Morris, 2019).

Another problematic strategy is the **dependence on Human Resources (HR)** for resolution. Handing over the entire responsibility of resolving toxic situations to HR may seem logical, but the effectiveness of this strategy depends on variety of factors. If organizational leadership is unwilling to enforce necessary actions, HR may struggle to achieve meaningful changes (Kusy & Holloway, 2019).

Immediate termination, reflected in the "adjust or leave" methodology described by Kusy & Holloway (2019), is considered a decisive strategy. However, this method is criticized for failing to address systemic factors that contribute to toxicity. Furthermore, eliminating a toxic individual does not automatically eliminate the toxic environment that individual has created; further steps are necessary to achieve this goal.

Choosing effective strategies in addressing toxicity requires understanding that their success depends on their appropriateness to the specific situation. All strategies outlined above may be grouped into two categories: adjusting to the toxic environment (even if temporarily) or leaving it. The "adjust or leave" approach signals powerlessness and inefficiency in dealing with toxicity. Restructuring the problem provides a temporary solution but is limited to leaders or those with direct managerial control leading to a limited resolution scope (Kusy & Holloway, 2019). This highlights the importance of thoughtful decision-making, recognizing that even the most effective strategy might fail if applied incorrectly.

4.4 Understanding Resistance to Change

Organizational changes are necessary to effectively address toxic environment or toxic leadership. It is important to understand that people generally dislike changes, and resistance is a natural reaction (Spina & Spina, 2020; Schiffer, 2011). However, in the context of toxicity, these changes are unavoidable in order to create a healthier and more productive work environment. However, even when changes are proposed for the better, resistance is a common reaction. People may resist change simply due to the discomfort associated with stepping into the unknown (Spina & Spina, 2020).

Individuals in toxic environments might be accustomed to dysfunctional behaviours, and any deviation from these familiar patterns can cause them distress. Recognizing that the resistance is not necessarily a rejection of the positive change is the first step toward effectively managing and reducing resistance while transforming a toxic workplace (Palmer, 2003). Thus, common causes for resistance to change include basic human discomfort with unfamiliar situations and the fear of potential negative consequences (Spina & Spina, 2020). Additionally, resistance may originate from a lack of understanding about the need for change or uncertainty about how the changes would affect one's role or the organization as a whole (Palmer, 2011).

To overcome resistance, organizations need a well-rounded strategy. Established frameworks, such as the one proposed by B. Palmer (2003), provide guidance in overcoming resistance to change. The model, shown below outlines the key elements of this transformative process:



Figure 5. Element of the change model by Palmer B. (2003)

First and foremost, fostering open communication is vital. Leaders should openly communicate the reasons behind the proposed changes, addressing concerns and providing a clear vision of the desired future state (Spina & Spina, 2020). This aligns well with the concept of "Creating a shared need" as outlined by Palmer B., highlighting the importance of providing the reason for change within the organization (Palmer, 2003).

Providing organizational support to employees especially during the change process creates a sense of ownership and commitment (Srivastava & Agrawal, 2020); when people believe that their opinions are valued and that they have a role in the decision-making process, they are more likely to embrace change. This aligns with the "Mobilizing commitment" element in Palmer's change model, emphasizing the importance of strong commitment from key constituents (Palmer, 2003).

Providing support and resources throughout the transition is essential. This involves not only addressing immediate concerns but also providing employees with the necessary tools, training, and opportunities for professional development (Spina & Spina, 2020). This is consistent with the "Anchoring the change in systems and structures" element in Palmer's model where the use of appropriate management systems to reinforce and anchor the change is underlined (Palmer, 2003).

Understanding and overcoming resistance to change in the context of workplace toxicity requires acknowledging the human tendency to reject the unknown. Organizations may successfully navigate and overcome resistance by communicating openly, integrating people in the change process, and offering continuing support.

5 Implementation

In this chapter of the thesis, the focus shifts from theoretical frameworks to the practical execution of the research methodology. The primary aim of this section is to provide a thorough overview of the methods employed in data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations throughout the research process.

5.1 Development Approach

Outlining the main methods guiding the development work becomes imperative as we progress into the practical phase of the thesis work. Research methods serve as a foundation for how we collect, analyse, and interpret data.

Research methods can be broadly categorized into two categories: **qualitative** and **quantitative**. While qualitative research utilizes methods such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis to examine the depth and complexity of human experiences and social phenomena, quantitative research focuses on transforming and quantifying concepts (Hale & Napier, 2013).

Quantitative methods leverage numerical data to answer questions like 'how many' or 'how much' and to assess the degree or importance of correlations between variables, as well as the predictability of occurrences (Hammond & Wellington, 2020). **Qualitative** methods, on the other hand, examine the quality or features of concepts by asking questions about 'how things are' and investigating, describing, and interpreting evidence that is predominantly made up of nonquantitative textual or visual material (Saldana, 2011). Research often combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a systematic way to develop a deeper understanding of a topic (Svoboda, 2023).

Moving from the broad discussion to the specifics of the thesis, a mixed methods approach has been adopted to explore the complex dynamics of toxic leadership within project environments. This methodology enables the simultaneous investigation of the subjective experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of professionals involved in project-based work, while also quantitatively analysing the prevalence and impacts of toxic leadership within project settings.

To gather firsthand insights, a comprehensive online questionnaire has been designed using Microsoft Forms. The questionnaire allows professionals to share their experiences with toxic leadership in project settings, addressing aspects from its prevalence to coping mechanisms and organizational responses.

Following data collection, a thorough analysis will be conducted with the use of Microsoft Excel to methodically arrange, group, and evaluate the responses. This strategy matches the goal of identifying patterns and themes from both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a detailed exploration of how toxic leadership influences project success and professional coping strategies.

Ethical considerations are paramount in the study to protect the anonymity and rights of participants. Acknowledging the possibility of sampling bias due to the voluntary nature of participation, this will be further addressed in subsequent sections on reliability and ethicality.

5.2 Data Collection

This section addresses data collection methods, with a focus on theoretical research, questionnaires, and observations. Benchmarking was initially considered as a feasible approach, but further investigation revealed its limits in meeting the study objectives, therefore questionnaire design and observational techniques emerged as key data collection methodologies.

Theoretical research functions as a foundation for the data collection methodology, guiding the exploration of toxic leadership dynamics within project environments. While benchmarking method was excluded from primary research methodology, it was nevertheless used to determine the most effective data collection method. The findings of theoretical research were valuable for guiding the utilization of data collection methods, including the development of a questionnaire.

Utilized data collection methods were summarized in a data collection plan visualization to provide a clear road map for executing the research methodology.

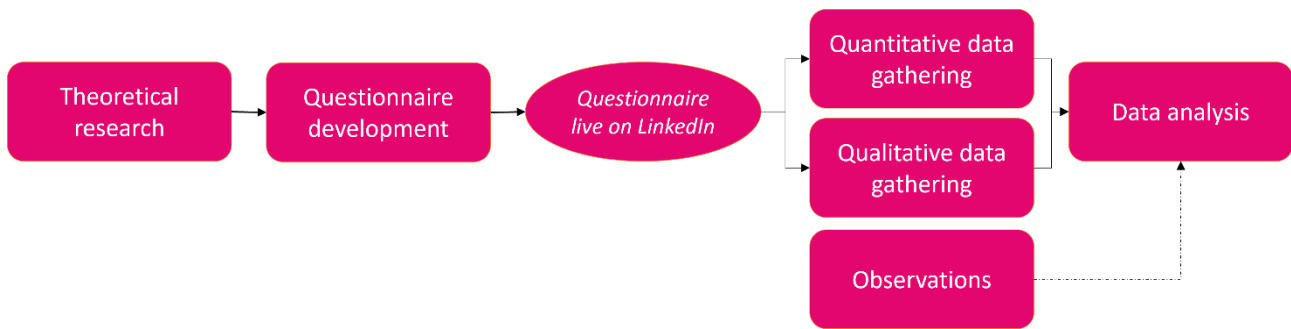


Figure 6. Data Collection Plan

5.2.1 Questionnaire Development

The use of questionnaire as a data gathering method in this study is an essential tool for carefully examining the complex dynamics of toxic leadership inside project environments. Questionnaires provide various benefits, including their capability to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. They provide a structured approach for collecting information from a large number of participants, allowing for a broad sampling of perspectives. Additionally, questionnaires provide opportunity for anonymity, encouraging participants to provide honest responses without fear of judgment or repercussions. The anonymity aspect is critical for this research. Despite potential challenges such as low response rates and potential for sampling biases, the versatility and scalability of questionnaire-based research make it a valuable method for the thesis (Lund, 2023).

The questionnaire consists of multiple-choice questions to enable results quantification, increase participation rates, and streamline data analysis. This format offers several advantages, including increased reliability by ensuring that respondents with varying levels of familiarity with the topic have the same selection of experiences to choose from. Additionally, the standardized format minimizes the potential for interpretation bias, making the data more robust and facilitating comparisons across respondents.

The multiple-choice answer options are created based on the insights from theoretical research, particularly addressing types of toxic behaviours, positive attributes of toxic leaders, and coping strategies identified in the literature.

Table 1. Questionnaire structure

Section	Name	Information collected
1	Personal and Professional Information	Age Gender Country of work Current job title Career level Job experience Field of work Experience of project-based work
2	Toxic Leadership Experiences	Frequency and amount Nature and toxic behaviours experienced Target group Positive traits of toxic leaders
3	Impact of Toxic Leadership	Emotional impact Organizational effects Consequences
4	Addressing Toxic leadership	Personal responses and effectiveness Organizational responses and actions Successful strategies Ineffective strategies
5	Life Beyond Toxic Leadership	Long-term effects Healthy work environment definition Opportunity for open feedback

5.2.2 Observations

Observational methods supplement questionnaire-based research by allowing researchers to record real-time behaviours, events, and phenomena in their natural surroundings. Baker (2006) defines observation as systematic and objective monitoring that provides rich qualitative and quantitative data. Participant and non-participant observation approaches have various advantages, with

participant observation allowing for more immersion in the study context, while non-participant observation preserves a more detached viewpoint.

In the context of this thesis project, the observation method was partially employed to supplement the questionnaire. The questionnaire was primarily shared on LinkedIn platform setting the audience to the author's current and former peers, colleagues, and networking professionals in related fields. This approach allowed both participant and non-participant observations. By combining the findings of these observations with insights gained from observing the reactions to the questionnaire, the research focus was guided towards understanding toxic leadership from the perspective of employees.

5.3 Analysis of the Data

The next step after collecting the data is to analyse the responses of the questionnaire. This step is crucial for uncovering insights and patterns within the dataset. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods was utilized to examine the collected data. Quantitative methods, such as cluster analysis, enable us to identify patterns and relationships within the data, while qualitative methods, like thematic analysis, help us uncover themes and nuances in participants' responses.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying reoccurring themes in textual data. This method involves familiarizing oneself with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes and reviewing them, defining and naming themes, and finally, concluding identified themes (Humble & Mozelius, 2022). Thematic analysis promotes the credibility and reliability of a study by providing organized and systematic processes for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

It is essential to recognize the limitations of empirical research data. While qualitative data provides valuable insights, it's important to remember that these responses represent individual perspectives rather than absolute truths. Therefore, maintaining objectivity and ensuring that personal biases do not influence the analysis process is crucial for upholding the integrity of the study.

Cluster analysis, on the other hand, is a quantitative method used to identify groups or clusters within a dataset based on similarities between data points. This method aims to organize the dataset into homogeneous classes, ensuring that objects within a class are similar to one another (Govaert, 2009). Cluster analysis is particularly useful for identifying distinct patterns or groups of responses within the data, shedding light on different dimensions of toxic leadership dynamics.

This study relied on a grounded theory analysis type of approach, emphasizing an inductive process in which themes and patterns emerged from the data itself. No predefined themes or hypotheses were established prior to the data analysis, allowing for a more exploratory and data-driven approach.

In terms of practical data analysis, Microsoft Excel was the main tool used. Initially, the dataset was extracted directly from the Forms site and further processed for data familiarization. Subsequently, numeric fields were separated from open comment fields. Thematic analysis was then applied to the open comments, involving a systematic process of sorting comments into separate cells, familiarizing with their content, noting common themes, developing categories, and grouping themes accordingly. For numeric data, various filtering techniques were employed to analyse different demographic categories separately, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and correlations with personal factors.

6 Results

6.1 Response Rates and Respondents

6.1.1 Reached Audience and Response rate

The questionnaire was published on the LinkedIn platform in early March 2024 with the intention of leveraging platform's capabilities to engage with a diverse audience. The initial post was shared without any audience restriction. It gained a significant traction, capturing the attention of 1993 viewers within a two-week timeframe. Notably, the visibility of the message increased as five individuals reposted it, indicating a level of interest and engagement within the LinkedIn community.

Analysing the demographics of the viewers showed valuable insights into the composition of the audience. In terms of company size, the questionnaire effectively reached individuals from companies with over 10,000 employees, accounting for 23.4% of the audience. Furthermore, viewers from companies with 51-200 employees, 1001-5000 employees, and 11-50 employees accounted for 19.2%, 12.3%, and 9.3%, respectively, demonstrating a diverse representation across different organizational sizes.

A large variety among the job titles was present reflecting the diverse professional backgrounds of the audience. Project manager was the most common job title, accounting 2.1% of the audience, followed by process engineers, hardware engineers, optical engineers, and software engineers.

Geographically, the questionnaire attracted considerable interest from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, with 59.5% of the viewers located in this region. Additionally, viewers from Tampere, Jyväskylä, Turku and even Seattle also engaged with the post, indicating a broad geographic reach.

A week later, a follow-up post was published to increase awareness and encourage more participation. While this post reached a slightly smaller audience of 547 individuals, the demographic distribution remained consistent with the initial post, indicating sustained interest across diverse groups.

Ultimately, the promotional efforts resulted in participation of 25 individuals, representing a diverse and engaged pool of respondents. While this number may seem rather modest, it was anticipated given the questionnaire's distribution method. By relying entirely on organic reach via LinkedIn, the voluntary nature of participation was maintained, ensuring an unbiased pool of participants.

6.1.2 Respondents Demographic

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were analysed based on pre-selected factors such as age, gender, country of work, current job title, career level, job experience, and field of work.

Age Distribution

The age distribution of the respondents varied across different age groups. Most respondents fell within the age range of 25-34 (13 individuals accounting for 52% of total respondents). This was followed by the age groups of 35-44 with 6 individuals (24%), and 45-54 with 4 individuals (16%).

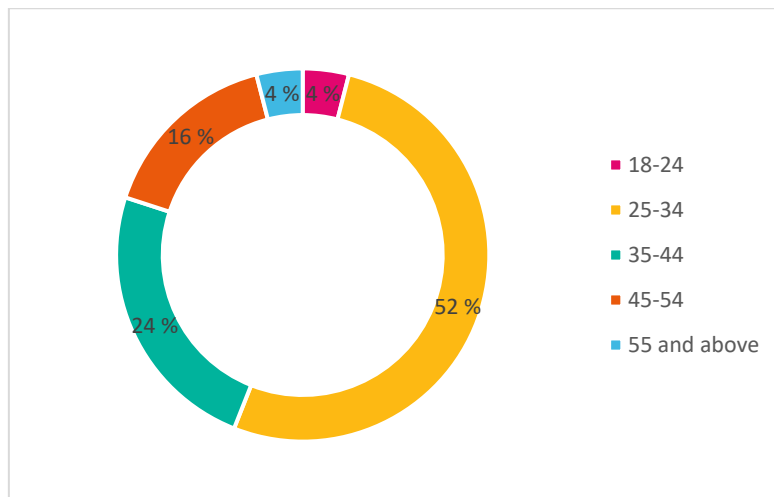


Figure 7. Age Distribution

Gender Distribution

Gender distribution included 10 women (40% of total responders) and 15 men (60%).

Country of Work

Most respondents reported Finland as their country of work (22 people, 88% of total respondents).

Current Job Title and Field of Work

The respondents had a diverse range of job titles. Engineer, manager (including team leaders and directors), and technician (including operators) were among the most prevalent job titles. Generalised titles were created for identity protection purposes. Furthermore, 88% of the respondents are working in the field of technology (varying from IT to Microelectronics to Pharmaceutical industry).

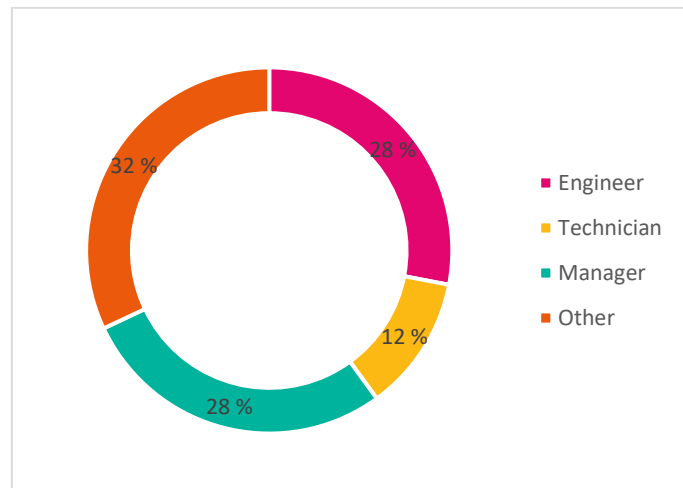


Figure 8. Job Title Distribution

Career Level

The career level of the respondents had a great variety with 5 individuals (20%) at the entry level, 9 individuals (36%) at the mid-level, 3 individuals (12%) at the senior level, 6 individuals (24%) at the manager level, and 1 individual (4%) at the director level.

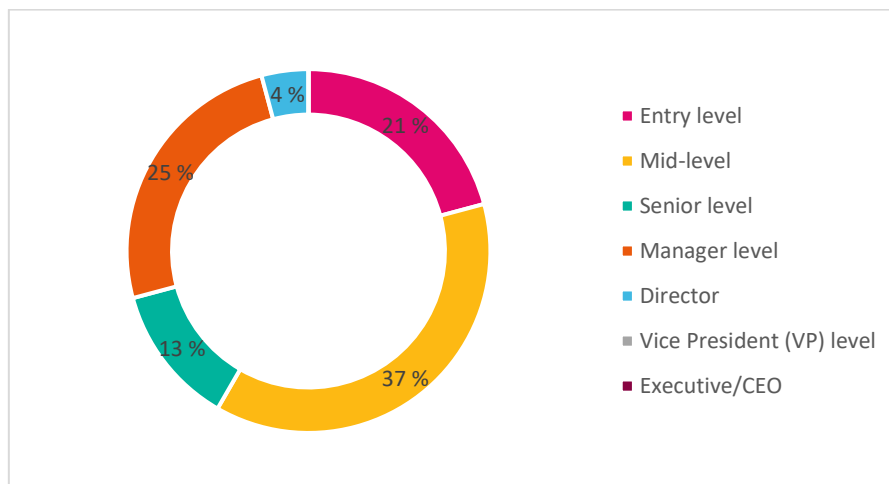


Figure 9. Career Level Distribution

Job Experience

Respondents had varied levels of job experience ranging from 0-2 years for 4 individuals (16%), to over 20 years of experience for 4 individuals (16% of total respondents). Detailed distribution can be seen from the Figure 10 below.

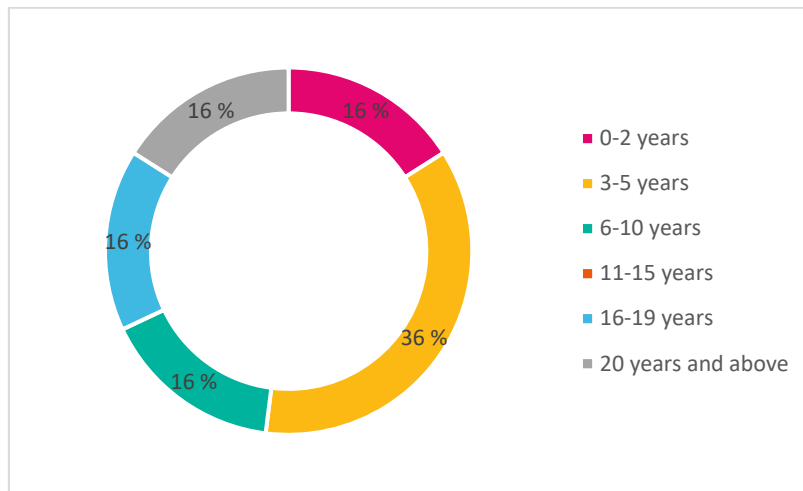


Figure 10. Job Experience Distribution

Project-Based Work Experience

The majority of respondents reported having experience with project-based work (19 people accounting for 76% of total respondents) while 5 people were unsure. Only 1 respondent (4%) indicated no prior experience.

6.2 Quantitative Analysis Results

6.2.1 Toxic Leadership Experiences

The results of quantitative study provide insights into the prevalence, nature, and impact of toxic behaviours within the workplace environment. As a first step, general statistics were analysed with the following results.

Starting point of the “Toxic Leadership Experiences” questionnaire was to identify the participants who have experienced toxic leadership. The majority of respondents (20 people or 80%) reported having experienced toxic leadership in their professional career, while 4 respondents (16%) reported no such experiences, and 1 respondent (4%) was unsure. Only people who have answered “yes” or “not sure” were able to proceed to answer the next questions while a separate flow was created for those who have not experienced it.

Respondents were asked to describe the frequency and severity of their toxic leadership experiences. A significant portion of respondents (76%) reported experiencing persistent behaviour patterns of toxic leadership, suggesting that these behaviours were not isolated incidents but rather consistent patterns over time. In contrast, fewer respondents reported isolated incidents (10%) or a series of incidents (14%) of toxic behaviour. The frequency of observing toxic behaviour also varied among respondents. While some reported occasional or regular occurrences (52%), others indicated consistent or frequent observation of toxic behaviours within the workplace environment.

Additionally, respondents were asked to specify the targets of the toxic behaviours they observed. The results indicate that toxic behaviours were primarily directed towards specific individuals or particular groups within the workplace (38%). Another significant portion of respondents (28%) reported that lower-level employees were targets of toxic behaviour.

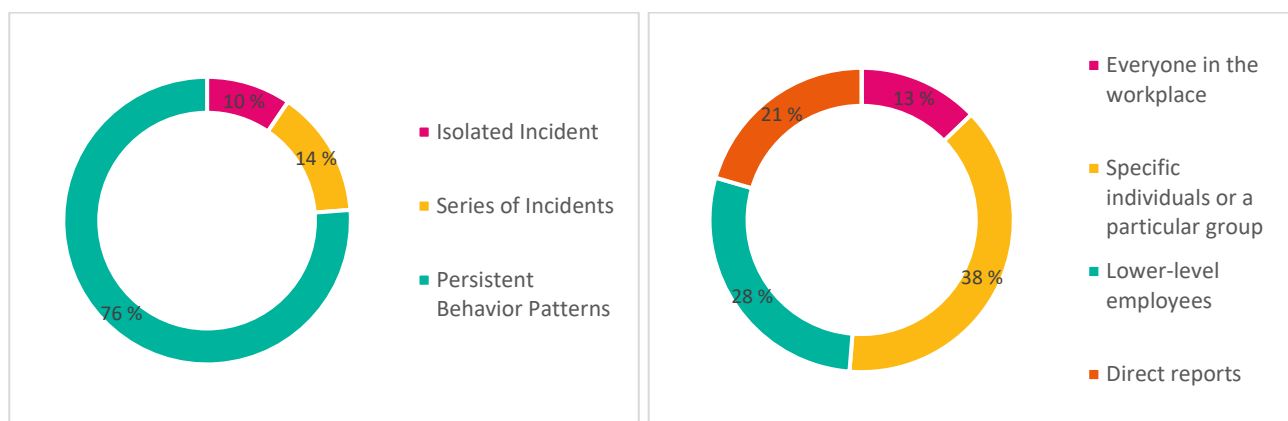


Figure 11. Experiences Frequency and Targets Distribution

Respondents identified a range of toxic behaviours they personally experienced in the workplace. The most commonly reported toxic behaviours included micromanagement (81%), lack of communication (76%), favouritism (76%), and leadership ineffectiveness (71%). These findings highlight the prevalence of various toxic behaviours within organizational settings. Additional comments from the respondents included “Quality of listening” and “Negative attitude towards getting to know the employee” as experienced toxic behaviours.

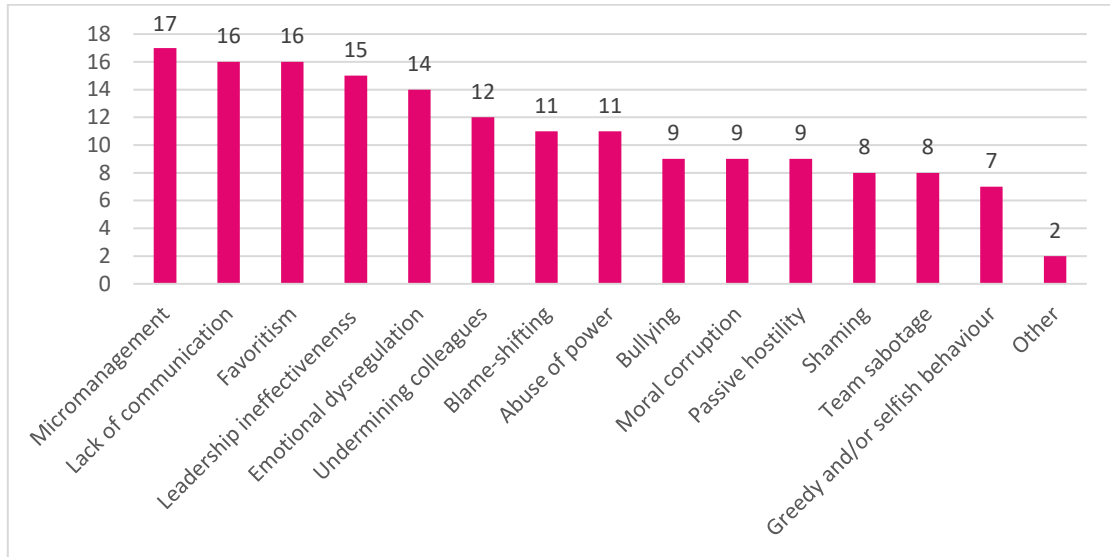


Figure 12. Experienced Toxic Leadership Traits

Despite displaying negative behaviours, respondents also observed certain positive traits in leaders who exhibited toxic behaviours which is supported by conducted theoretical research. Confidence (67%), hard-working (48%), and charisma (38%) were among the most observed positive traits.

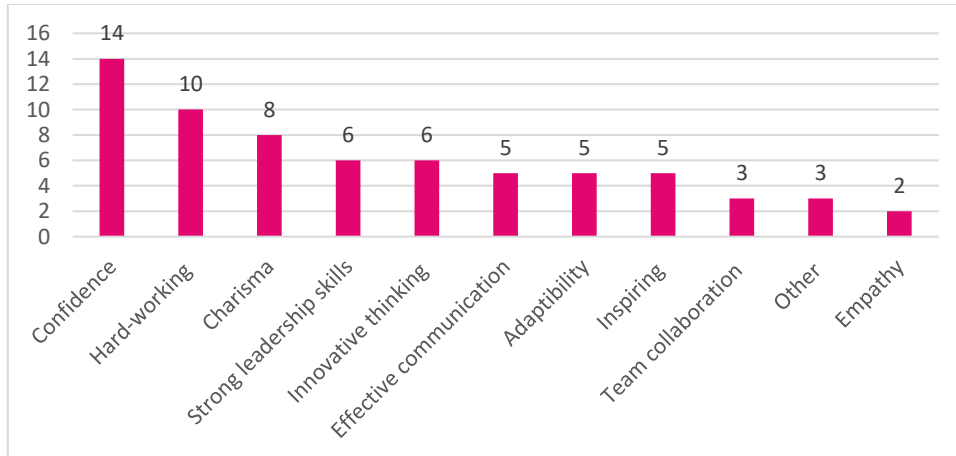


Figure 13. Positive Traits of Toxic Leaders

Next step in the quantitative analysis included analysing patterns and correlations in provided responses. Several clusters have been created based on gender, age category and work experience. Due to the limited number of participants in each category, it was decided against clustering job title and/or industry.

- **Age Category:**

- Respondents in the 35-44 age category reported experiencing toxic leadership behaviours more frequently compared to other age groups. This age group also tended to have more extensive job experience, potentially influencing their perception and tolerance of toxic behaviours.
- Respondents in the age category 25-34 have experienced toxic leadership in 2.2 companies on average while for other age categories that number remained below 2. However, it is important to note that this is the biggest age group accounting for 52% of total respondents amount.

- **Job Experience:**

- Respondents with 3-5 years of job experience reported the highest incidence of experiencing toxic leadership, followed by those with 6-10 years of experience.
- Respondents with 3-5 years of job experience reported experiencing toxic leadership across multiple companies more frequently compared to other experience categories. Additionally, respondents with 3-5 years of job experience predominantly described their experience with toxic leadership as persistent behaviour patterns, indicating a prolonged exposure to such behaviours early in their careers.

- **Gender:**

- Women reported a higher incidence of experiencing toxic leadership compared to men, with a larger proportion answering affirmatively to having experienced toxic leadership in their professional careers (3 out of 4 participants who responded not to have experienced toxic leadership were men).
- Women were more likely to describe their experience with toxic leadership as persistent behaviour patterns compared to men.
- Women reported a higher frequency of regularly observed toxic behaviour compared to men.

No other strong patterns or correlations were found across different demographic groups. The limited number of participants in each category makes it challenging to draw definite conclusions; how-

ever, it provides a general overview of experiences with toxic leadership among different demographics. At this point, the experiences appear relatively comparable across all groups regardless of factors such as gender, age, job experience, or career level.

6.2.2 Impact of Toxic Leadership

Impact of toxic leadership on the respondents has been analysed next. The results have shown that the emotional toll on individuals affected by toxic leadership is profound across all demographic categories. Majority of the respondents reported feeling frustrated and demoralized (86%); exhausted, angry, and helpless (67%). It indicates the detrimental effect on mental well-being.

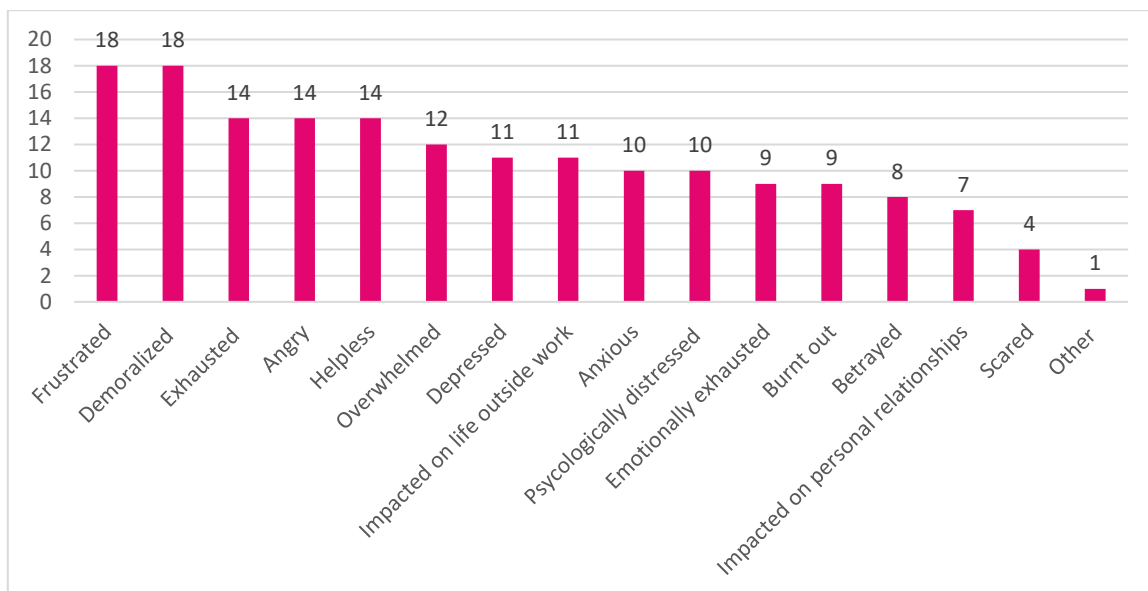


Figure 14. Toxic Leadership Impact on Respondent's Well-being

Moreover, the results have shown that the broader organizational environment suffers significantly due to toxic leadership. Demoralization (67%), loss of trust (62%), counterproductive environment and decreased collaboration (57% both) have been among the top reported consequences. These factors contribute to declining employee morale and engagement, leading to decreased productivity and performance. It was also reported that toxic leadership had notable repercussions for the organization itself including increased employee turnover (62%), decline in overall performance (52%) and decreased employee morale (62%). The results shows disruptive influence of toxic leadership on team dynamics and organizational stability.

Additional question was asked about toxic leadership and its impact on project outcomes. According to the majority of respondents, the following consequences have been observed in project environments: decreased quality of work (57%), longer time to complete projects (52%) and increased number of issues experienced in the project (52%).

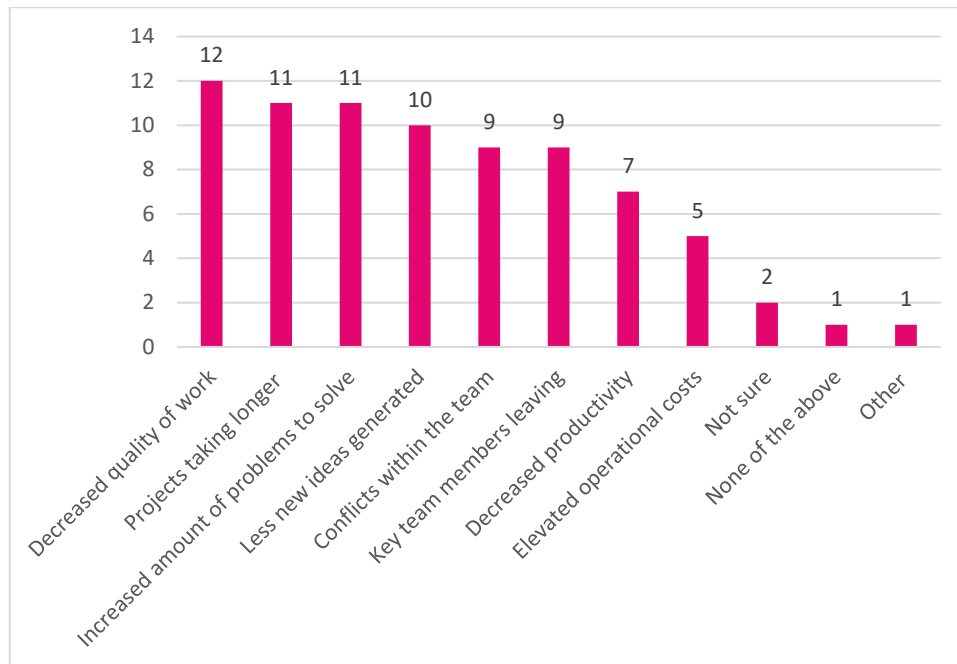


Figure 15. Toxic Leadership Impact on Project Outcomes

At this time no specific correlations were found between different demographics, suggesting that individuals across all groups have been similarly affected by toxic leadership behaviours. "Other" comments have provided additional insights that toxic leadership not only made individuals feel less self-worthy but also profoundly impacted team dynamics and interactions. Participants noted a shift towards a "survival mode" mentality and increased conflicts within project teams, indicating a broader organizational impact beyond individual experiences.

6.2.3 Addressing Toxic leadership

This section of the questionnaire had the following structure: "individual actions and their effectiveness" and "organizational actions and their effectiveness". First, individual actions have been analysed by side-by-side plotting.

The responses show that “looking for other job opportunities/leaving the company” action was the most commonly reported and simultaneously perceived as effective by the majority of participants. It suggests that many individuals view leaving the toxic work environment as the most viable solution to address the issue. While seeking support from colleagues was the second most common action taken, it was perceived “effective” by only a small fraction of respondents. Engaging in self-care practices to cope with the situation was another common approach taken and perceived as effective by a significant fraction of respondents which highlights the importance of self-care in managing the stress and emotional toll of dealing with toxic leadership.

Interestingly, speaking to the toxic leader and raising concerns to HR were perceived the least effective actions taken in the face of toxic leadership even though tried by 38% and 29% of all respondents. All of the respondents have been proactive in trying to mitigate and/or cope with toxic leadership.

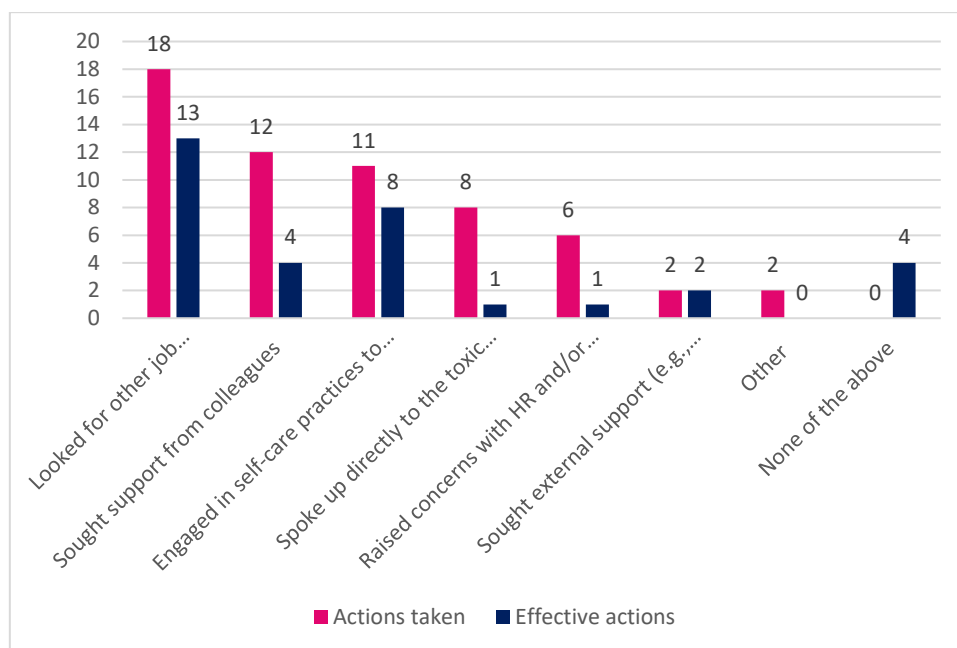


Figure 16. Individual Actions to Address Toxic Leadership and Their Effectiveness

Overall, no strong variations in the actions taken were observed based on demographics. Only a couple of patterns and correlations emerge across different demographic groups:

- **Gender:** Both men and women reported similar actions, however, women seemed more inclined to raise concerns with HR or higher management compared to men.
- **Career level and job experience:** individuals across various career levels demonstrated similar actions, however, those in higher managerial positions and/or with more experience seemed more likely to take formal actions, such as raising concerns with HR or higher management.

What comes to organizational actions and their effectiveness, the results showed that while some organizations have taken steps like leadership training and implementing clear policies, these actions were not widely reported, suggesting a lack of proactive measures in many workplaces. Creating confidential reporting channels for toxic behaviours was the most effective action reported by respondents alongside removing toxic leaders from their positions. Despite some positive actions taken by organizations, it is evident there is still room for improvement in addressing toxic leadership comprehensively, particularly in terms of implementing proactive measures and fostering a culture of ethical leadership.

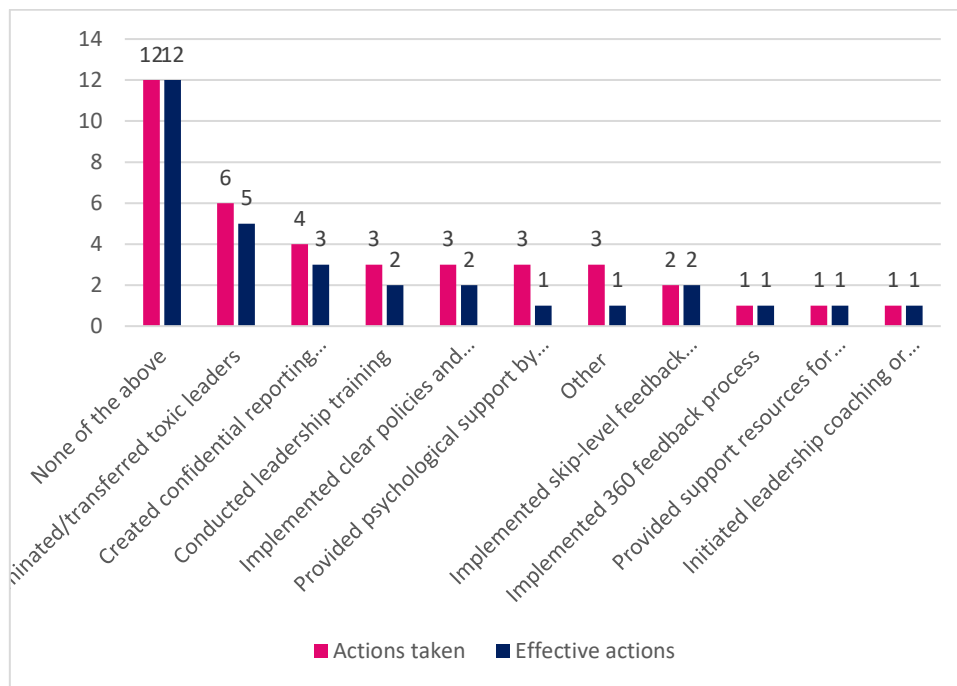


Figure 17. Organizational Actions to Address Toxic Leadership and Their Effectiveness

6.3 Qualitative Analysis Results

Thematic analysis has been utilized for analysing open comment fields. The analysis process is outlined below, and the results are presented in the forthcoming sections.



Figure 18. Thematic Analysis Process

6.3.1 Toxic Leadership Experiences

Respondents were given the opportunity to describe the toxic situation and/or behaviours in their own words. Several themes emerge from the provided responses:

- Avoidance and Deception:** Respondents mentioned situations where conflict was avoided or not addressed, and deception was used to cover up or shift blame onto others. This includes instances where individuals were not acknowledged for their contributions, while others took credit for their work.

- **Incompetence and Micromanagement:** Several respondents highlighted instances where the toxic leaders lacked the necessary skills or competence to effectively lead teams. Micromanagement and its extreme cases were also prevalent, with leaders excessively controlling tasks and processes, even to the extent of redoing work already completed by employees.
- **Emphasis on Short-Term Fixes:** Upper leadership's focus on firefighting rather than working on sustainable solutions emerged as a significant theme. This approach neglects long-term planning and problem-solving, leading to recurring issues and a lack of organizational learning and development.
- **Belittling and Intimidation:** Instances of belittling, bypassing achievements, and employing intimidation tactics were reported.
- **Passive-Aggressive and Narcissistic Behaviours:** Respondents described leaders displaying passive-aggressive attitudes, narcissism, and a lack of accountability.
- **Lack of Support and Guidance:** Leadership's failure to provide support, resources, or guidance to employees emerged as a common theme among majority of the respondents who wished to provide open feedback.

Overall, these responses aligned well with collected quantitative data and highlight the damaging effects of toxic leadership behaviours on employee well-being, productivity, and organizational culture.

6.3.2 Addressing Toxic leadership

This section of the questionnaire provided respondents with an opportunity for the open feedback to describe the most effective individual and organizational strategies to cope with toxic leadership.

From individual strategies standpoint, the following observation were made:

- **Self-Care and Seeking Support:** Many respondents highlighted the importance of self-care practices and seeking support from trusted individuals or confidants to cope with toxic leadership situations.

- **Leaving the Company:** Leaving the organization emerged as the **most** common and effective solution for dealing with toxic leadership, especially when no changes were observed or when toxic behaviour persisted at the highest levels of leadership.
- **Disengagement and Avoidance:** Some individuals chose to disengage from toxic leaders or minimize interactions with them, either by distancing themselves or changing teams, to reduce exposure to toxic behaviour.
- **External Intervention or Organizational Changes:** In a few cases, external intervention or organizational changes, such as the firing of the CEO or broader business challenges, indirectly contributed to addressing toxic leadership issues.

Once again, the results of qualitative analysis align well with those of quantitative analysis conducted prior. These themes reflect the complex and varied approaches individuals adopt to navigate toxic leadership situations. Leaving the company, however, was nearly unanimously an only viable solution in the situations of many.

Lesser open text responses were received in regard to organizational initiatives where the overwhelming majority reported complete lack of initiatives from the organizational side. Two respondents reported that transferring the toxic leader away from the team and organizational layoffs helped to mitigate toxic leadership: “no toxic leader – no toxic leadership”. Similar response rate and theme was present in the open question regarding the most ineffective strategies.

6.3.3 Life Beyond Toxic Leadership

This section of the questionnaire included only open text questions and was fully optional. The responses were analysed, and common themes are presented below:

- **Fear and Anxiety:** Respondents expressed lingering fear and anxiety associated with the prospect of encountering similar toxic leadership once again in their career life. While some respondents mentioned being scared to be in similar situations again, others described constant anxiety at work. Moreover, a few respondents expressed caution and vigilance, particularly towards older male bosses.
- **Emotional Distress and Physical Symptoms:** Many respondents reported experiencing burn-out, depression, stress, and constant self-doubt as long-term effects of toxic leadership. Some respondents highlighted their need in for anti-depressants as a result of the toxic leadership experience, only further emphasizing an extensive impact on their overall health.
- **Impact on Career Growth:** Several respondents noted that their growth was negatively affected by toxic leadership experience. They struggled to regain their confidence and progress in their careers after leaving the toxic environment.
- **Impact on Work Motivation:** Several respondents noted a decline in their motivation and engagement at work following the toxic leadership experience. They struggled to maintain their previous levels of productivity and enthusiasm.

Thematic analysis revealed the diverse and profound long-term effects of toxic leadership, ranging from emotional distress and career setbacks to personal growth and cautiousness in future professional interactions.

Additionally, the respondents were asked about additional measures could organizations take to create a healthier work environment and prevent toxic leadership behaviours. The following themes were created based on the open text responses:

- **Leadership Training and Development:** Many respondents emphasized the importance of leadership training programs to develop the necessary skills to lead effectively and prevent

toxic behaviours. They suggested implementing training and progression plans for managerial promotions, ensuring that leaders prioritize empathy, understanding, and genuine behaviour.

- **Promoting Open Communication and Feedback:** Respondents stressed the need for open communication channels and feedback mechanisms within organizations. They suggested creating an atmosphere where employees feel comfortable reporting toxic behaviours and where management actively listens to and acts upon employee feedback.
- **Creating a Respectful and Empathetic Culture:** Several respondents highlighted the importance of fostering a culture of respect, empathy, and professionalism within the organization.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Respondents called for greater transparency and accountability in organizational practices. They suggested implementing measurement systems to track and address toxic behaviours, as well as holding management accountable for fostering a healthy work environment.
- **Promoting Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-being:** Some respondents proposed measures to promote employee well-being, such as eliminating unnecessary tasks, shortening the workweek, and providing opportunities for growth and development for all employees.
- **Selection Process for Leaders:** Respondents emphasized the importance of selecting leaders based on their ability to manage people effectively rather than solely on tenure or technical skills. They advocated for promoting leaders who prioritize the well-being of their team members and create a safe and trusting environment.

Lastly, participants were asked to describe a healthy work environment (aka the “northern star”). Using thematic analysis as a foundation, the following vision has been created combining themes derived from provided responses:

“A healthy work environment encompasses harmony and mutual respect, promoting open and honest communication and transparency. It prioritizes inclusivity, ensuring every voice is heard and valued. It is an environment in which employees receive constructive feedback and support, fostering a culture of autonomy, trust, and positivity. Professionalism is essential and communication is con-

ducted respectfully and productively. Innovation is encouraged, driving overall motivation and purpose. Ultimately, it's a space where individuals feel respected, supported, trusted and empowered to excel."

7 Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Reliability and Ethicality

In research, especially qualitative research, the concepts of trustworthiness, reliability, and validity play an essential role in determining credibility and integrity of the research findings. Trustworthiness consists of many elements, including the accuracy of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, and the believability of the findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of the research methodologies used, ensuring that the approach remains consistent across different researchers and projects. Validity, on the other hand, focuses on the accuracy and fidelity of the research results, ensuring that they accurately represent the phenomena under examination (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

The research incorporates a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Traditional methods used to evaluate the reliability of qualitative research include assessing internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Rose & Johnson, 2020). While the statistical techniques utilized in quantitative research may not be directly suitable for qualitative studies, alternative strategies have been developed for qualitative studies including truth value, consistency and neutrality and applicability (Noble & Smith, 2015). In practical terms, these strategies involve acknowledging personal biases, critically evaluating research methods, maintaining detailed records, exploring diverse viewpoints, presenting comprehensive participant accounts, ensuring clarity in analysis, collaborating with colleagues, validating findings with participants, and using data triangulation for a well-rounded understanding (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Applying these strategies to assess the reliability and validity of the conducted research requires considering a variety of trustworthiness aspects. Firstly, the concept of "**value**" or "truth value" which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and recognizes the researchers' personal opinions and experiences that may influence the approach. In this study, the questionnaire aimed

to study the lived experiences of individuals impacted by toxic leadership, acknowledging the inherent diversity of opinions. To accommodate this diversity, the questionnaire included both predefined fields and open text fields, allowing participants to express their experiences in their own words. This method attempted to capture the variety and complexity of participants' experiences rather than imposing uniformity.

The next aspect of trustworthiness is **consistency**, which ensures that the methods used are reliable and consistent. This requires the researcher to maintain a 'decision-trail', ensuring that every decision made during the research process is transparent and well-documented (Noble & Smith, 2015). To achieve this, predefined data analysis plan (including data analysis methods) was closely followed, with both paper and electronic means utilized to maintain a clear paper trail and allow for backtracking of findings if needed. The manageable size of the dataset made it easy to follow and implement the plan effectively.

It is important to note that the author has firsthand familiarity with the research topic. Thus, it was crucial to adopt the role of an external observer to minimize the influence of personal opinions and experiences of toxic leadership on the interpretation of results. This brings us to the next aspect - **neutrality**, also known as confirmability. To ensure neutrality, prolonged exposure to the dataset was minimized. The results were examined only after the questionnaire had been closed to avoid forming any preliminary ideas or conclusions. The anonymous nature of the questionnaire was beneficial in maintaining neutrality and eliminating familiarity with any respondent.

Lastly, the **applicability** of the research needs to be evaluated. The questionnaire was designed in a generalized manner without setting any constraints on who can participate in the research. It was made available to a wide audience, allowing for broad participation. The predefined fields provide a unified scale, while the open-text sections supplement them, enabling anyone to replicate the study in different contexts.

Research ethicality requires upholding principles to safeguard participants' rights and dignity throughout the research process. It includes complying with ethical norms and professional codes of conduct throughout the whole research process. Ethical research requires getting participants' informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, minimizing pain or discomfort, and

carrying out research that benefits society without exploiting or causing unnecessary harm to individuals or communities.

The research was conducted through a fully anonymous questionnaire, ensuring voluntary participation. The author did not learn the identity of the participants, which increased confidentiality. Participants were informed that the results would contribute to a master's thesis, which would later be publicly available. However, open-text comments were not made public to prevent potential identification based on language or other details. Additionally, details regarding minority participant groups were withheld to protect identities. While anonymity safeguarded participants, it limited the author's ability to validate results or seek additional feedback later on.

The study adheres to the ethical guidelines set by Jamk University of Applied Sciences. Research sources include mainly traditional print materials (with online access) like books, articles, academic journals and dissertations.

7.2 Theoretical and Practical Results Integration

Incorporating theoretical research findings into practical observations provides a more nuanced understanding of project leadership dynamics, the prevalence of toxic behaviours, and their impact on the overall organizational environment as well as project environment. The theoretical foundation presents fundamental concepts, while empirical findings offer insights into how these concepts manifest in the real world and the effectiveness of strategies aimed at addressing them.

Projects, defined as a temporary endeavour, involve formation of smaller teams that may be described as micro-organizations within the larger framework. This setup creates a double-edged sword in terms of toxic leadership. On one hand, these smaller teams can protect individuals from toxic influences elsewhere in the organization, with project managers often serving as buffers. However, once the project is complete, this protective barrier dissolves, exposing team members to potential toxicity once again. Moreover, if the toxic leader is in the project team, the challenges increase drastically, as there are limited opportunities to distant oneself from the toxicity. The questionnaire results indicate that toxic leadership is affecting employees in the project environments, despite the assumption of insulation provided by such environments.

Conducted theoretical research underlines the importance of effective leadership styles in project management contexts. Concepts such as transformational leadership emphasize the significance of inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration in driving team performance and fostering innovation.

Additionally, it demonstrated the detrimental consequences of ineffective leadership. The practical research supported the conclusions about the harmful impact of toxic leadership on individuals, organizations, and project performance. Furthermore, empirical data indicate that toxic leaders are more likely to exhibit autocratic or micromanagement tendencies.

Theoretical background provides comprehensive overview of the detrimental effects of toxic behaviours on organizational culture and employee well-being and valuable insights into the consequences of toxic leadership. Additional research has been performed to identify ineffective strategies, with an assumption that certain approaches may provide less desired results than others hence explaining the issue's rising significance.

However, practical analysis shows an alarming reality: while theoretical models recommend various strategies for dealing with toxic leadership, such as establishing transparent communication channels and support mechanisms for employees to report toxic behaviours, empirical findings highlight a fundamental gap between theory and practice. Contrary to expectations, respondents' top concern was not the ineffectiveness of the tactics employed to prevent toxic leadership, but rather the unsettling lack of action done by organizations in response to recorded cases of toxicity.

This disparity highlights a significant issue in organizational dynamics: the failure of many organizations to proactively address toxic leadership behaviours. Rather seeking effective ways to mitigate toxicity and cultivate a healthy work environment, organizations frequently disregard or dismiss claims of toxic conduct, causing widespread employee dissatisfaction and disappointment. As a result, individuals feel driven to quit in pursuit of a more friendly and welcoming work atmosphere.

The empirical results were largely consistent with the theoretical background, demonstrating that participants resonated with the types of toxic leadership behaviours described in the research study. It became clear that toxic leadership is rarely an isolated incident, but rather a recurrent pattern of

behaviours, frequently directed at specific individuals. Additionally, participants highlighted that toxic leaders are able to maintain a positive reputation inside the organization as a whole despite their toxic behaviours: participants acknowledged that toxic leaders often possess positive traits such as charisma, confidence, and a hardworking nature. Unfortunately, the predominant viewpoint among participants was that the only effective way to escape the toxic environment was to leave the organization.

Toxic leadership is a serious risk to project success due to the way it affects team cohesiveness, reduces motivation, and develops a culture of fear and distrust. Project success is dependent on effective communication, collaboration, and common objectives among team members, all of which are compromised in the presence of toxic leadership. Micromanagement, favouritism, and lack of transparency can negatively impact creativity, impede decision-making, and result in poor-quality results. Moreover, the emotional toll of toxic leadership can lead to increased absenteeism, turnover, and disengagement among team members, further increasing project difficulties. When toxic leadership dominates, projects frequently experience delays, cost overruns, and decreased stakeholder satisfaction. Addressing toxic leadership is thus critical not just for maintaining a healthy work environment, but also for assuring project success and sustainability.

What comes to individual strategies, the questionnaire findings were in agreement with theoretical background and highlighted effective individual strategies for coping with toxic leadership, including self-care and seeking support. Despite organizational inaction, participants have demonstrated resilience. The results have also provided a comprehensive overview of key elements contributing to a positive work environment, notably emphasizing open communication, trust, and empathetic leadership. These insights emphasize the critical importance of creating supportive workplaces that are conducive to project success.

7.3 Addressing Research Questions

Now is time to revisit the research questions formulated at the beginning of this thesis work and provide comprehensive answers based on the findings and analyses conducted throughout this research endeavour.

Research Question 1: *What is the impact of toxic leadership on the success of the project and how is this impact perceived by the professionals working in the project environment?*

The examination of the impact of toxic leadership on the success of projects revealed complex dynamics. Theoretical background set the groundwork for understanding the negative impacts of toxic behaviours including bullying, favouritism, and a lack of communication on company culture and employee well-being. Empirical findings from the questionnaire analysis further supported these insights, revealing a stark reality of how toxic leadership manifests in project settings and its pervasive impact on project outcomes.

Professionals working in project environments shared firsthand experiences of the damaging effect of toxic leadership on the success of the project. They noted instances of avoidance, micromanagement, and intimidation performed by toxic leaders, which impeded the progress of the project and unity in the team. Moreover, the negative effects of toxic leadership were not limited to project outcomes but also to individual well-being, leading to emotional distress, burnout, and decreased motivation. The negative influence on organizational culture was apparent in decreased collaboration, lack of trust, and an unproductive work environment, which ultimately hindered the organization's capacity to fulfil its strategic goals. One of the respondents provided an example of, perhaps, the worst outcome which resulted in dissolving of the whole organization.

Research Question 2: *What are the coping mechanisms and transformative strategies (and their effectiveness) in addressing the toxic leadership in project environments and/or eradication of organizational toxicity altogether?*

The exploration of coping mechanisms and transformative strategies aimed at addressing toxic leadership revealed a range of individual and organizational actions. Theoretical background highlighted the importance of transparent communication channels, support mechanisms, and leadership development programs as potential solutions to mitigate toxic behaviours within organizations. However, empirical analysis revealed a large discrepancy between theoretical recommendations and practical implementation.

Individual coping strategies became prevalent among professionals navigating toxic leadership situations. Responses indicated a preference for self-care practices, seeking support from colleagues, and, in some cases, disengagement from toxic leaders as effective strategies to cope with toxic environments. On the organizational front, despite existing theoretical recommendations and practices to eradicate toxic leadership (for instance, implementing transparent communication channels and leadership development programs), the questionnaire findings showed an alarming picture of a lack of proactive measures within organizations. As a result, many professionals resorted to leaving the organization as the most effective solution to address toxic leadership, highlighting a systemic issue requiring immediate attention.

7.4 Conclusions and Development Proposals

The research conducted in the course of the thesis work emphasizes the significance of leadership within organizations, particularly in project environments where effective leadership is critical to success. Toxic leadership emerges as a cancerous force within organizations, creating major risks to project success and employee's well-being. Organizations must take immediate measures to eradicate toxic leadership as employees are unable to resolve these issues on their own, and inaction is likely to result in employee turnover as well as low morale.

The research shows that projects do not necessarily shield employees from the toxicity of leadership, highlighting the need for organizational intervention. The inability to take action and implement any of the existing solutions is more likely to be root cause of the problem rather than their ineffectiveness. However, limited data has been collected to make strong conclusions and future research should explore the impact of implementing these strategies in organizations to assess their effectiveness in mitigating toxic leadership occurrences.

However, there are solutions to address toxic leadership within organizations. Participants of the study provided valuable insights, complementing theoretical findings, suggesting strategies such as leadership development programs, transparent communication channels, support mechanisms, development of active listening and cultural transformation initiatives.

Following strategies can be highlighted for organizations to implement in the battle against toxic leadership:

- **Leadership development programs:** Invest in comprehensive leadership development programs to promote healthy leadership behaviours.
- **Transparent communication channels:** Establish transparent communication channels and feedback mechanisms to encourage reporting of toxic behaviours (for example, 365 feedback systems outlined in the theoretical foundation).
- **Support mechanisms:** Prioritize the implementation of support tools for employees facing toxic leadership, including as counselling and mentorship programs. Listen and act on employees' feedback regarding toxic leadership conduct.
- **Cultural transformation:** Create a culture of respect, empathy, and professionalism where toxic conduct is not accepted.

What comes to employees, the following guidelines may prove beneficial in the face of toxic leadership:

- **Seek support:** Reach out to trusted colleagues, mentors, or HR for support when facing toxic leadership situations. Seek external support if available (for example, occupational healthcare).
- **Self-care:** Put your own health and well-being first. Explore the benefits of self-care practices to cope with the stress and emotional toll of dealing with toxic leadership.
- **Report toxic behaviours:** Utilize available communication channels to report toxic behaviours to higher management.

Everyone deserves to work in a healthy work environment where they feel respected, supported, and empowered to succeed in their roles, without suffering from the negative consequences on their career, personal life and well-being posed by toxic leaders.

As the research questions have been answered and objectives reached, it is essential to continue exploring this topic in future research. Suggestions for future research include extending the study to a wider range of participants, conducting studies directed towards specific industries, and potentially collaborating with companies to observe and interview individuals in their environments. With limited research conducted on the practical aspects of toxic leadership, there is a great scope and opportunities for further exploration.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire structure

1. Personal and Professional Information

Question	Answer
1. Age category	18-24
	25-34
	35-44
	45-54
	55 and above
	Prefer not to say
2. Gender	Woman
	Men
	Non-binary
	Prefer not to say
3. Country of work	
4. Current job title	
5. Career level	Entry level
	Mid-level
	Senior level
	Manager level
	Director
	Vice President (VP) level
	Executive/CEO
6. Job experience	0-2 years
	3-5 years
	6-10 years
	11-15 years
	16-19 years
	20 years and above
7. The field of work	
8. Have you ever done project-based work?	Yes
	No
	Not sure

2. Toxic Leadership Experiences

9. Have you ever experienced toxic leadership in your professional career?	Yes
	No
	Not sure
10. In how many companies have you experienced toxic leadership during your career?	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
	More than 5

11. What would best describe your experience with toxic leadership?	Isolated Incident
	Series of Incidents
	Persistent behaviour Patterns
13. Opportunity to briefly describe the nature of the toxic leadership situation. *	Open answers
	Micromanagement
	Lack of communication
	Favouritism
	Leadership ineffectiveness
	Emotional dysregulation
	Undermining colleagues
	Blame-shifting
	Abuse of power
14. Which of the following toxic behaviours have you personally experienced in the workplace?	Bullying
	Moral corruption
	Passive hostility
	Shaming
	Team sabotage
	Greedy and/or selfish behaviour
	Other
16. Towards whom was the toxic behaviours primarily directed?	Everyone in the workplace
	Specific individuals or a particular group
	Lower-level employees
	Direct reports
	Not sure
17. How frequently did you observe the displayed toxic behaviour?	Rarely (infrequent occurrences)
	Occasionally (intermittent occurrences)
	Regularly (few times a month)
	Frequently (few times a week)
	Consistently (almost constant occurrences)
	Not sure
18. Despite the negative behaviours, have you observed the same leaders who displayed toxic behaviours also exhibit any of the following positive traits? Select all that apply.	Confidence
	Hard-working
	Charisma
	Strong leadership skills
	Innovative thinking
	Effective communication
	Adaptability
	Inspiring
	Team collaboration
	Other
	Empathy

3. Impact of Toxic Leadership

19. How did the toxic leadership behaviours make you feel?	Frustrated
	Demoralized
	Exhausted
	Angry
	Helpless
	Overwhelmed
	Depressed
	Impacted on life outside work
	Anxious
	Psychologically distressed
	Emotionally exhausted
	Burnt out
	Betrayed
	Impacted on personal relationships
	Scared
	Other
20. How did toxic leadership impact the broader organizational environment?	Loss of trust
	Restricted growth
	Lack of psychological safety
	Counterproductive environment
	Decreased collaboration
	Demoralization
	Not sure
	Other
21. Did toxic leadership lead to any of the following consequences for the organization? Select all that apply.	Increased employee turnover (employees leaving the company)
	Decline in overall performance
	Drop in sales or revenue
	Decreased employee morale and engagement
	Increased operational costs
	Rise in absenteeism
	Loss of clients or partnerships
	Legal or compliance issues
	None of the above
	Not sure
	Other
	Decreased quality of work
	Projects taking longer
	Increased amount of problems to solve
	Less new ideas generated
	Conflicts within the team
	Key team members leaving
22. Did you notice any of the following effects on the projects you worked on? Select all that apply.	Decreased productivity
	Elevated operational costs

	Not sure
	None of the above
	Other
23. Opportunity for open feedback.*	

4. Addressing Toxic Leadership

24. What actions have you personally taken to address toxic leadership behaviours in your workplace? Select all that apply.	
	Looked for other job opportunities/left the company
	Sought support from colleagues
	Engaged in self-care practices to cope with the situation
	Spoke up directly to the toxic leader
	Raised concerns with HR and/or higher management
	Sought external support (e.g., professional union, occupational healthcare)
	Other
	None of the above
25. Which actions, if any, were effective in addressing toxic leadership?	Spoke up directly to the toxic leader
	Raised concerns with HR and/or higher management
	Sought support from colleagues
	Engaged in self-care practices to cope with the situation
	Looked for other job opportunities/left the company
	Sought external support (e.g., professional union, occupational healthcare)
	None of the above
	Other
26. Opportunity for open feedback: what was the most successful initiative? how did it help?	
27. What actions has your organization taken to address toxic leadership behaviours in the workplace? Select all that apply.	
	None of the above
	Eliminated/transferred toxic leaders
	Created confidential reporting channels for toxic behaviours
	Conducted leadership training
	Implemented clear policies and procedures against toxic leadership
	Provided psychological support by professionals
	Other

	Implemented skip-level feedback sessions (meetings with higher level management than direct leader)
	Implemented 360 feedback process
	Provided support resources for affected employees
	Initiated leadership coaching or mentoring programs
28. What actions has your organization taken to address toxic leadership behaviours in the workplace? Select all that apply.	Conducted leadership training
	Implemented clear policies and procedures against toxic leadership
	Implemented 360 feedback process
	Created confidential reporting channels for toxic behaviours
	Provided support resources for affected employees
	Provided psychological support by professionals
	Initiated leadership coaching or mentoring programs
	Eliminated/transferred toxic leaders
	Implemented skip-level feedback sessions (meetings with higher level management than direct leader)
	None of the above
	Other
29. Opportunity for open feedback: what was the most successful initiative? how did it help?	
30. What strategies were ineffective in your opinion? Did they have slightly positive, neutral (none) or negative impact on the situation? *	

5. Life Beyond Toxic Leadership

31. Have there been any long-term effects on you as a result of experiencing toxic leadership?	
32. In your opinion, what additional measures could organizations take to create a healthier work environment and prevent toxic leadership behaviours?	
33. How would you describe a healthy work environment?	