

# The Effect of Toxic Leadership on Counter-Productive Work Behaviors and Intention to Leave: An Empirical Study

Youssef H. Manaa<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Business administration department, Faculty of commerce - Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt

Correspondence: Youssef H. Manaa, Business administration department, Faculty of commerce - Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

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## Abstract

The current research determined the effect of toxic leadership on counter-productive work behaviors and the intention to leave work among a randomly selected sample of 357 employees of the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company using correlation analysis and regression analyses. There was a direct and significant effect of toxic leadership on each of the 5 dimensions of counter-productive work behaviors (abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, withdrawal), and the intention to leave work. Based on these results, employers should select leaders based on criteria that incorporate the psychological and humanitarian aspects of dealing with subordinates, furnish leaders with the relevant training and continuously track leaders' behavior to ensure that stay clear of any toxic practices.

**Keywords:** Toxic leadership, Counter-productive work behaviors, abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, withdrawal, and intention to leave work

## 1. Introduction

Leaders are an essential part of an organization's success; therefore, leadership style has attracted the interest of organizational researchers. Leadership styles are derived from the personality of leaders and is reflected in their behavior. Leadership styles ultimately affect employees' behaviors and attitudes at work and subsequently their performance (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Hence, a leader who possesses imitable characteristics such as integrity, respect for others, competence and vision can positively impact employees (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). On the other hand, a leader who displays negative characteristics, such as narcissism, self-promotion, and manipulative and controlling behavior negatively impacts employee morale and performance (Schmidt, 2014). Brandle (2006) argues that the combination of a leader's negative characteristics portray him or her as practicing "toxic leadership." Similarly, Xuanfang (2017) defined the term toxic leadership to include behaviors such as wrongly blaming employees, making unrealistic demands on employees, humiliation, and refusing to acknowledge employee accomplishments. Toxic leaders abuse their power; toxic leaders mismanage their subordinates, are rude to them, treat them with disrespect, do not listen to them, and act in a threatening manner towards them.

Toxic leaders negatively impact the workplace. Bhandarker and Rai (2019) reported that toxic leadership in an organization decreases organizational commitment, job satisfaction and results in job burnout. As Xuanfang (2017) pointed out, toxic leadership not only affects individual employees, but also affects the organizational culture leading to a state of prevailing silence among employees for fear of reprimand. Similarly, toxic leadership behaviors lead to employee mistreatment and harm, higher labor turnover, and lower job engagement as argued by Hoffman & Sergio (2020).

In the literature, toxic leadership behaviors result in a work environment dominated by counter-productive behaviors (Indradevi, 2016), emotional exhaustion, and workers' silence (Burke, 2017). Toxic leadership also leads to distrust, fear, increased psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and withdrawal (Webster et al., 2016). Employees' feeling of stress and low productivity (Winn & Dykes, 2019).

Thus it is important to study the consequences of toxic leadership. This study addresses two negative consequences that can result from toxic leadership: employee counter-productive work behaviors in its five dimensions (abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, withdrawal), and the intention to leave work from the point of view of employees of the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

This paper is structured as follows: The first section presents a literature review on theoretical and conceptual frameworks for toxic leadership, counterproductive work behaviors and intention to leave. The next section illustrates hypothesis development followed by the methodology used. Subsequent sections present the results, interpretation and recommendations.

## **2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

In this section, the researcher defines basic concepts addressed in this study and presents literature relevant to the study variables.

Customarily, research in the field of leadership is assessed from a positive perspective. However, the recent abuse of power in several business organizations has redirected researchers' attention to the dark side of leadership. Scientific studies have used a variety of terms to describe these destructive forms of leadership such as: Abusive (Tepper, 2000) Abusive, Tyrannical, Bad or Unethical (Kellerman, 2004), Incivility (Johnson and Indvik, 2001), The dark side of leadership (Mathieu et al., 2014), and Toxic (Pelletier, 2009).

Toxic leadership, also called destructive leadership, is a leadership style in which a leader expresses the inappropriate and aggressive behavior towards his or her subordinates. Employees in a toxic work environment suffer frequent reprimands and emotional abuse. (Xuanfang, 2017).

Dobbs and Do (2019) argue that the different terms used by different researchers often describe the same phenomenon: personal influences and unwarranted hostility by those in positions of power to their subordinates that negatively affect subordinates and harm the general good of the organization. However, other researchers (Dogan & Baloglu, 2019; MacLennan, 2017; Singh et al., 2017) perceive the term "toxic leadership" as more comprehensive in terms of the type of behaviors and their destructive effects unlike other terms for destructive and dysfunctional leadership.

### *2.1 Definition of Toxic Leadership*

Padilla et al (2007) stated that leaders' behaviors arise from the combination of three factors: leaders, subordinates, and the organizational culture, also called the "toxic triangle," which in combination negatively affect leadership behaviors. Toxic-destructive leaders have an immense need for Power, or more precisely, authoritarianism, narcissism, adverse life history, and hate mentality. Subordinates, are categorized as either Conformers or Colluders. Conformers allow toxic leaders to exercise excessive force in a manner that obscures conformers' eyes from seeing that their disadvantaged or negatively affected. Colluders on the other hand support the ideology and values of toxic leaders. The third factor, organizational culture or environmental factors, represents the absence of checks and balances or specific procedures to deal with toxic leadership behaviors, and the presence cultural values that promote toxicity.

Dogan & Baloglu (2019) described toxic leadership as a multidimensional concept that includes bad supervisory behaviors such as narcissism, authoritarianism, ostentation, arrogance, and instability. Toxic leaders possess personal characteristics that have detrimental effects on subordinates; their conduct and actions demean and discourage employees and hurt employees' feelings (Hoffman & Sergio, 2020). Toxic leadership behaviors can appear from the highest leadership position (such as a manager) to the lowest levels of leadership such as that of a supervisor (Bhandarker and Rai, 2019).

### *2.2 Toxic Leadership and Counterproductive Work Behaviors*

Toxic leadership is often seen as aspects of destructive leadership or what is called dark leadership. In trying to define toxic leadership, most of the focus has been on its negative effects on subordinates. Toxic leadership increases subordinates stress levels by reducing their motivation and performance. In addition, toxic leaders may be insensitive and indifferent to others' feelings which hurts subordinates in the long run (Kurtulmus, 2020). These leaders also engage in practices characterized by terrorism and torture and will choose dishonest and immoral paths at any time want (Webster et al., 2016).

Toxic leadership behaviors may also lead to deviations in the organization's environment, retaliatory activity from subordinates, alienation of subordinates, reduced work achievement, and physical and psychological stress. Furthermore, toxic leaders do not have any degree of confidence in their subordinates; On their part, they are exposed to outright contempt, which leads to an increase in negativity among the subordinates, which increases pressure between them and eventually leads to revenge in the form of counter-productive work behaviors (Kayani & Alasan, 2021).

MacLennan (2017) noted that any form of bad behavior from leaders, including toxic behaviors, can lead to counter-productive behaviors. Therefore, in stressful situations or in the absence of resources, employees can

retaliate against their leaders by displaying counter-productive behaviors. Kayani & Alasan (2021) concluded that toxic leadership has a significant positive effect on counter-productive work behaviors from a study conducted on 355 nurses in public sector hospitals in Pakistan. A research study by Justin (2016) conducted on a sample of 197 medical, nursing and laboratory employees in Nigerian public hospitals concluded that there is a positive significant correlation between toxic leadership and counter-productive behaviors.

Aydinay et al (2021) used regression analysis found that when the level of employees' perception of destructive leadership increased by one unit, counter-productive work behaviors increased by 0.382 units. They also illustrated that destructive leadership accounts for 14% of the change in counter-productive work behaviors from a study was conducted on a sample of 486 employees working in the service sector in the fields of (education, health, hotels, retail trade, and information) in Mersin, Turkey.

Based on the previous literature review, the researcher developed the first hypothesis as shown below:

H1: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the counter-productive behaviors in its five dimensions (abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, withdrawal) from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

The first hypothesis was divided into five sub-hypotheses as follows:

H1/a: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on abuse dimension from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

H1/b: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on production deviance dimension from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

H1/c: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on sabotage dimension from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

H1/d: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on theft dimension from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

H1/e: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on withdrawal dimension from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

### *2.3 Toxic Leadership and the Intention to Leave Work*

The decision to leave work goes through several stages that end with the actual process of leaving work. The intention to leave work can be defined as "a conscious and deliberate will to leave the organization" (Bester, 2012, Cited in: Naeem & Khurram, 2020). Organizations bear diverse and immense costs when employees leave the organization including the costs of work disruption, recruitment, and training. Therefore, an intention to leave work is undesirable in any organization; thus, it is necessary to identify the factors that can increase the employee's intention to leave work (Naeem & Khurram, 2020).

Leadership styles can influence an employee's intentions to leave work (Basak et al., 2013). For instance, ethical leadership reduces the intent to leave work (El çı et al., 2012; Tajneen, 2022), whereas abusive leadership has a negative impact on organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational justice, which ultimately increase employees' intention to leave work (Weberg & Fuller, 2019).

According to the Embeddedness model (Mitchell et al., 2001), employees tend to stay in employment as long as they feel connected to and included in the organization and that they are an important part of their organization. But toxic leaders can make their employees feel less integrated within their organizations by negatively affecting their commitment. Likewise, according to the social exchange theory, toxic leaders violate the theory's fundamental principle of mutual benefit between individuals through their self-centered, self-interested, and controlling behavior that can eventually prompt employees to leave work (Cook et al., 2013, Cited in: Fizza & Khurram, 2020). Moreover, Zeffane & Melhem (2017) argue that employees tend to leave their workplaces when the employees are unsatisfied and stressed like when a toxic supervisor makes subordinates unhappy and their lives difficult.

Leaders with toxic behaviors can harm the well-being of employees and increase their dissatisfaction, and thus increasing employee intentions to leave (Bas kan 2020). Some previous studies have shown that bad and abusive supervision increases intentions to leave (Ahmad and Begum, 2020; Pradhan et al., 2019; Richard et al., 2020). Conversely, some positive leadership styles tend to reduce possibility of employee departure (Amunkete and Rothmann, 2015; Sun and Wang, 2017).

The study conducted by Reyhanoglu & Akin (2022) on 680 of different employees (permanent and temporary) in

a number of Turkish hospitals concluded that toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on employees' tendency to leave work. Similarly, Hitchcock (2015) evaluated 471 individuals working in a number of non-profit public institutions in San Diego, America and concluded that toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on employees' tendency to leave work.

It has been proven that there is a positive significant correlation between toxic leadership and employees' intention to leave work in the study by Amutenya (2019) conducted on a sample of 66 employees in the local administration of Windhoek, Namibia. Lucia & Priscilav (2022) concluded from a study conducted on a sample of 172 employees in a number of public and private companies in Brazil that there is a significant positive impact of toxic leadership on the intention of employees to leave work.

As regards the indirect effect of toxic leadership on the intention to leave work, the study by Naeem & Khurram (2020) which was conducted on a sample of 393 employees in the banking sector in Pakistan using the structural equation modeling method concluded that psychological well-being and employee engagement partly mediate the relationship between toxic leadership and intent to leave work. On the other hand, to assess factors influencing employee retention, Tanuwijaya & Jakaria (2022) conducted a study on a sample of 155 faculty members and their assistants at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Trisakti, Indonesia and concluded that transformational leadership affects more than toxic leadership on retention employees through the mediating role of job satisfaction.

Based on the previous literature review, the researcher developed the second hypothesis shown below:

H2: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the intention to leave the work from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Population and Sampling

The research population was all the 4, 976 employees of the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.. Statistical tables were used to arrive at a sample size of 357 based on a margin of error of 5% (Bazara'a, 1989).

Since the objective of the study was to estimate of a certain phenomenon in the study population from the reality of the sample data, we relied on a randomly drawn probability sample (Bazraa, 1989). The questionnaire was distributed to the sample population with a response rate of 79% (282 completed questionnaires).

#### 3.2 Measurement and Instrumentation

This research study had one independent variable (toxic leadership), and two dependent variables (Counter-productive work behaviors and intention to leave work). The scale of toxic leadership adapted from the work of Schmidt (2014) had fifteen items. The scale for the counterproductive behavior was adapted from the work of (Chand and Chand, 2014) and had five dimensions namely – abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft and withdrawal. The scale of intention to leave work was measured through (Bothma and Roodt, 2013) and consisted of six items. All variables were measured using interval scales as well as using a 5-point Likert scale with a description of (1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) undecided (4) agree (5) strongly agree.

#### 3.3 Reliability

The Cronbach alpha reliability was used to estimate the internal reliability of the scales. The results of the Cronbach alpha are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Cronbach reliability coefficients

scales	No. of items	Alpha coefficients
Toxic leadership	15	.832
Abuse	5	.810
Production deviance	5	.798
Sabotage	5	.730
Theft	5	.846
Withdrawal	5	.843
Intention to leave	6	.761

#### 3.4 Analysis Technique

The researcher used the statistical methods in analyzing the data using the computer through the Statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS):

- Descriptive statistics represented by the arithmetic mean and standard deviation to describe the study variables

- Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine the magnitude and direction of the relationship between the dependent variables and the independent variable used in this research.
- Regression analysis to determine the relationship between the independent variable on the dependent variables.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Demographic

The majority of the respondents were males (71%), had a bachelor's degree (82%) while others had attained high school education (13%) or post graduate education (5%). As regards work experience and tenure, the majority had worked for 5-<10 years (65%), followed by 15-<20 years (25%), 15+ years (7%) and < 5 years (3%)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for study variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Toxic leadership	3.95	.657
Counter-productive work behaviors	3.83	.749
intention to leave work	3.88	.773

Table 2 shows employees' perceptions towards toxic leadership styles portrayed by their supervisors which the employees considered to be very high. as evidenced by a mean value of 3.95; a result that implies the respondents felt that their leaders often applied this leadership style. There was also a high level of counter-productive work behaviors and intention to leave work among the employees of the company under study; mean value of 3.83 and 3.88, respectively.

### 4.2 The Correlation between the Research Variables

Table 3 shows the correlation between toxic leadership as an independent variable and dimensions of counter-productive work behaviors (Abuse, Production deviance, Sabotage, Theft, and Withdrawal) and intention to leave as the dependent variables.

Table 3. The results of correlation analysis between the research variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Toxic leadership							
Abuse	.645**						
Production deviance	.721**	.598**					
Sabotage	.597**	.637*	.752**				
Theft	.620**	.712**	.604**	.655**			
Withdrawal	.710**	.689*	.707**	.720**	.586*		
Intention to leave	.739**	.538**	.604**	.729**	.679**	.772**	

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Table 3 illustrates positive and significant relationships between Toxic leadership and all dimensions of counter-productive work behaviors: Abuse, Production deviance, Sabotage, Theft, and Withdrawal with (R) values equal: .625, .721, .597, .620, .710, respectively a statistical significance of <0.01 level for all the 5 relationships. The findings also revealed a positive and significant relationship between Toxic leadership and Intention to leave work with an  $r = .739$  and a statistical significance at a <0.01 level.

Hence, the aforementioned results concur with the predictions of the research hypotheses.

### 4.3 Regression Analysis

Finally, regression analysis was used to determine the effect of toxic leadership on both counter-productive work behaviors, and intention to leave work to test the first hypothesis, which states:

*H1: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the counter-productive behaviors in its five dimensions (abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, withdrawal) from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.*

Table 4. The results of regression analysis of the effect of toxic leadership on the dimensions of counter-productive work behaviors

Variables	abuse		production deviance		sabotage		theft		withdrawal	
	$\beta$	(T) test	$\beta$	(T) test	$\beta$	(T) test	$\beta$	(T) test	$\beta$	(T) test
Toxic leadership	.432	3.421*	.346	2.247**	.335	2.682**	.272	3.119*	.310	2.693*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.246		.214		.287		.226		.203	
(F) Test	19.324		21.329		24.401		18.394		20.392	
Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

According to the results shown in Table 4, toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the abuse dimension (standard regression coefficient of 0.432) at a level of significance less than 0.05, and toxic leadership accounts for about 25% of the change in the abuse dimension in support of the first sub-hypothesis (H1/a).

Additionally, toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the production deviance dimension (standard regression coefficient of 0.346 at a level of significance less than 0.05), and explains about 21% of the change in the production deviance dimension in support of the second sub-hypothesis (H1/b).

Similarly, toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the theft dimension (standard regression coefficient of 0.335 at a level of significance less than 0.05), and explains about 28% of the change in the theft dimension in support of the third sub-hypothesis (H1/c).

Likewise, toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the sabotage dimension (standard regression coefficient of 0.272 at a level of significance less than 0.05), and explains about 23% of the change in the sabotage dimension in support of the fourth-hypothesis (H1/d).

Finally, toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the withdrawal dimension (standard regression coefficient of 0.310 at a level of significance less than 0.05), and explains about 20% of the change in the withdrawal dimension, in support of the fifth sub-hypothesis (H1/e).

The second hypothesis states:

*H2: Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on the intent to leave the work from the point of view of employees in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.*

Table 5. The results of regression analysis of the effect of toxic leadership on the intent to leave the work

Variables	intent to leave the work	
	$\beta$	(T) test
Toxic leadership	.407	3.421*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.268	
(F) Test	19.324	
Sig.	.000	.000

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

According to the results shown in Table 5, toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on intent to leave the work (standard regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.407 at a level of significance less than 0.05), and explains about 27% of the change in the dependent variable intent to leave the work in support of the second hypothesis (H2).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of toxic leadership on counter-productive work behaviors in its five dimensions (abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, withdrawal) and intention to leave the workplace from the employees' point of view at the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company.

The study noted that subordinates highly perceived their supervisors as toxic leaders. This result is consistent with Jaja's (2015) who argued that subordinates need comfort, stability, and solutions from their managers. But these expectations appear as an optical illusion among African and Arab employees whose managers prefer instead to push subordinates out of their comfort zone through toxic tendencies. Consequently, prevalent toxic leadership behaviors among supervisors have a direct and significant effect on all five measures of counterproductive work behavior namely— abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft and withdrawal. These results are consistent with that in the literature. For instance, Aydinay et al. (2021) prove that destructive leadership has a positive and significant effect on counter-productive work behaviors among employees in the service sector in Turkey. Likewise (Justin, 2016), a different study concluded that there is a positive significant correlation between toxic leadership and counter-productive behaviors among employees in Nigerian public

hospitals. Moreover, other researchers (Kayani & Alasan, 2021) concluded that toxic leadership has a significant and positive effect on counter-productive work behaviors among nurses in public sector hospitals in Pakistan. Often toxic leadership behaviors are reciprocated by counterproductive behaviors in response to treatments that are considered abusive, humiliating, or degrading. Subordinates are prone to transmit aggression to peers or properties and assets accompanied by actions ranging from sabotage to destroying of company property, theft, withdrawal. On the contrary, humane treatment of employees would encourage them to demonstrate positive behaviors at work because they feel valued, trusted, and important to the organization.

The results of the current study also showed that toxic leadership has a significant impact on employee intention to leave work. This finding suggests that leaders' toxic practices make it difficult for employees to stay, thus increasing their intent to leave the company.

The results of the current study are consistent with previous literature that directly or indirectly examined the influence of toxic leaders on employees' intention to leave. According to (Labrague et al., 2020), compared to employees working under transformational leadership, employees working under toxic leadership have a higher their sense of work stress and higher turnover intentions. Similarly, Lucia & Priscila (2022) concluded that there is a significant and positive impact of toxic leadership on the intention of employees to leave work in several public and private companies in Brazil. However, the results of the current study partially agree with the findings of Naeem & Khurram (2020) that illustrated an indirect effect of toxic leadership on the intention to leave work through a mediation effect on psychological well-being and employee engagement.

## 6. Limitations

The research was confined to three variables: toxic leadership as an independent variable, and two consequences of toxic leadership practices as dependent variables: counter-productive work behaviors and intention to leave work.

The current study, a cross-sectional study, simultaneously collected data for both dependent and independent variables making it impossible to identify cause-and-effect relationships between the variables which is only possible in longitudinal study designs.

The research was limited to the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company in the Greater Cairo Region due to cost and time constraints.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the results of the field study, the authors wish to make practical recommendations for officials at the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company and for future research.

### 7.1 Practical Recommendations

The leaders of the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company should:

- Develop foundations and criteria for selecting leaders that focuses on positive leadership patterns that strike a balance between work requirements and humanitarian and ethical aspects such as transformational leadership and authentic leadership which contributes to achieving the desired results at all hierarchical levels.
- Work to raise the level of effective leadership among the leaders through the design and implementation of training programs to provide these managers with skills and positive attitudes that help them in dealing with subordinates.
- Conducting periodic psychological tests for leaders at all hierarchical levels to ensure the leaders' personal traits qualify them to continue to perform their duties.
- Continuously review of the behavior of their leaders with their subordinates to ensure that their leaders are free from toxic practices.

### 7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

- Future research should test the same variables in this study in other sectors, for instance service organizations such as hotels or hospitals, and industrial organizations to enhance generalizability.
- The effect of toxic leadership should be assessed on other variables other than those addressed in the present study, such as: employee creativity, organizational citizenship behaviors.
- Furthermore, other researchers could also conduct a study that includes both the antecedents and the consequences of toxic leadership to generate sufficient knowledge of this subject.

## 8. Conclusion

The researcher conducted this research to determine the effect of toxic leadership on both counter-productive work behaviors and intention to leave work in the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading Company using regression analysis of data collected from 357 employees. Toxic leadership is predictive of employees' counter-productive behaviors and intention to leave work. Suitably selected leaders ought to be trained on both psychological and technical aspects of leadership and be tracked to ensure that they are free from toxic behaviors.

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