

# When Power Hurts: An Explorative Study on the Relationship Between Toxic Leadership, Emotional Exhaustion, Turnover Intention and job Satisfaction

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**Abstract:** The present study is aimed to two related objectives: 1) to make a systematic review of the relationship between toxic leadership, burnout and turnover intentions in the workplace 2) to use this knowledge to investigate if and to what extent a toxic leadership style might negatively impact workers' burnout and turnover intentions. This second objective was pursued conducting a survey focused on a convenience sample of 156 employees (48% males and 50% females), working in small and medium enterprises across Italy. The structured questionnaire adopted is composed of validated measures of emotional exhaustion (Sirigatti et al. 1988 ), toxic leadership (Schmidt, 2008), turnover intention (Mobley et al., 1978) and job satisfaction (Wanous et al., 1997). Results showed that all dimensions of burnout and turnover intentions were positively related to toxic leadership. Limitations of the study as well as practical implications for research and practice in HRM are discussed.

**Keywords:** toxic leadership; turnover intention; job satisfaction; emotional exhaustion; burnout

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## 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, leadership is one of the most authoritative streams of research within social sciences applied to management and organizations. A positive leadership style is a secure drive to organizational performance and effective human resource management (Ramdas and Patrick, 2018).

However, within the last decades, growing research interest has developed toward negative behaviours in organizations, highlighting the pivotal responsibility that a dysfunctional leadership might have (Wu and Hu, 2009). Studies on ineffective leadership have examined punitive or aggressive leadership behaviours, such as tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a; 2005b), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000, Tepper et al., 2009; Zellar, Tepper and Duffy, 2002), despotic leadership (Bass and Stogdill, 1990), bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004), narcissistic leaders (Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006), unethical leaders (Treviño et al., 2003), destructive leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007) and corporate psychopaths (Boddy et al., 2015; Boddy, 2017).

In the present study, we focused specifically on the construct of toxic leadership, which is a major aspect of dark leadership "spreading insidiously and undetected like a poison", it contaminates individuals, teams and ultimately the whole organization (Goldman, 2008; Vreja et al., 2016).

Lipman-Blumen (2005a) describes toxic leaders as "those who act without integrity by dissembling and engaging in various other dishonourable behaviours, including behaviours such as corruption, hypocrisy, sabotage and manipulation, as well as other assorted unethical, illegal, and criminal acts" (p. 18).

According to Pelletier (2010), the leader can be considered toxic if the follower is physically or psychologically harmed by the leader's actions and it creates long-lasting impairment in the subordinates. On the other hand, Illies and Reiter-Palmon (2008) added that toxic leaders create conflicts and complicate the organizational environment by causing emotional damage to their subordinates. It is equally interesting to note that the toxic leader never considers his/her behaviour negative and they always believe their behaviour to be socially acceptable (Maxwell, 2015; Schyns 2015).

The most recent research developments on healthy and sustainable workplaces (Di Fabio & Peirò, 2018; Khalil et al., 2021) have shown that a toxic leadership style could heavily impact followers' motivations and behaviours, negatively influencing their commitment and engagement with the organization. Psychological distress and

turnover intentions could be among the most diffused reactions shown by followers experiencing this negative and dysfunctional leadership style (Barlow and Durand, 2005).

In view of the above, the present study aims to investigate if and to what extent a toxic leadership style might negatively impact workers' burnout and turnover intentions.

For this purpose, the paper is organised as follows. A brief introductory section sets the theoretical framework that justified the study, presenting definitions of toxic leadership and its correlation in terms of workers' organizational behaviours, specifically turnover intentions and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, a second section presents a description of the main steps adopted to conduct the systematic literature review. Finally, the empirical study is presented, summarizing the main findings and drawing conclusions.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Since the 1990s, the dark side of leadership has received a growing attention. Although using different labels several scholars have concurred to identify and to specify the set of behaviours that could be distinctive of this style of management, that certainly impact negatively on workplace climate and performance.

Einarsen and colleagues (2007) defined this negative leadership "destructive", as long as they focused on "the systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates" (p. 209). Lipman-Blumen (2005) used for the first time the label "toxic" to stress the need that some leaders might feel to abuse of their power: the leader's effect on the followers harmed them, physically or psychologically. This is a very similar definition with the one proposed by Tepper (2000) who defined this kind of leadership "abusive". In the same vein, Pelletier (2010) maintained that the most frequent and harmful toxic actions are the influence over self-esteem and lack of integrity. Finally, Schmidt (2008; 2014) gave an important contribution to the operationalization of the construct of toxic leadership identifying its 5 main components: self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, authoritarian leadership.

However, overcoming the richness of definitions proposed by the literature the common conclusion to which all studies come is the evidence that bad or toxic leadership is linked to several negative outcomes which can be classified broadly into psychological and performance-related outcomes.

Followers' stress and psychological well-being are the most researched psychological outcomes of toxic leadership (Burriss et al., 2008; Chen and Kao, 2009; Chua and Murray, 2015; Walton, 2007). Bad leadership is also significantly associated with performance-related outcomes like decreased organizational commitment, injustice perceptions, role conflict, interpersonal deviance and poor work-related attitudes among subordinates (Duffy et al., 2002; Hoobler and Hu, 2013; Mawritz et al., 2012). Toxic leadership is also found to be negatively associated with job satisfaction, job dedication, work motivation and turnover intentions (Aryee et al., 2008; Elangovan and Xie, 2000; Reed, 2004; Reed and Bullis, 2009; Templer, 2018).

Emotional exhaustion is among the most important psychological outcomes of toxic leadership. It is characterised by an emotional condition that involves negative views of the self, of others and of the environment. It is characterized by unpleasant subjective states such feeling tense, worried, worthless, withdrawn and irritable. This state is a constitutive part of the burnout syndrome, namely the result of accumulated stress experienced in the workplace and draining individuals from all their personal and professional resources, certainly impacting of their coping behaviours and negatively influencing their working performance.

According to Hobman et al. (2009), long-term and regular contact with toxic leaders cause strain and reduced well-being. Similarly, Kusy and Holloway (2009) also reported low self-worth and reduced self-efficacy among followers working with toxic leaders for a longer period of time. Toxic leaders wear down subordinates by yelling, criticizing and ridiculing, which immediately reduce their self-confidence, self-worth and self-efficacy (Harvey et al., 2014). According to Richman et al. (1992), subordinates' perceptions of mistreatment results in negative psychological consequences such as hostility, anxiety and depression. Findings of the study conducted by Wu and Hu (2009) also suggested that there is an inverse relationship between abusive supervision and emotional

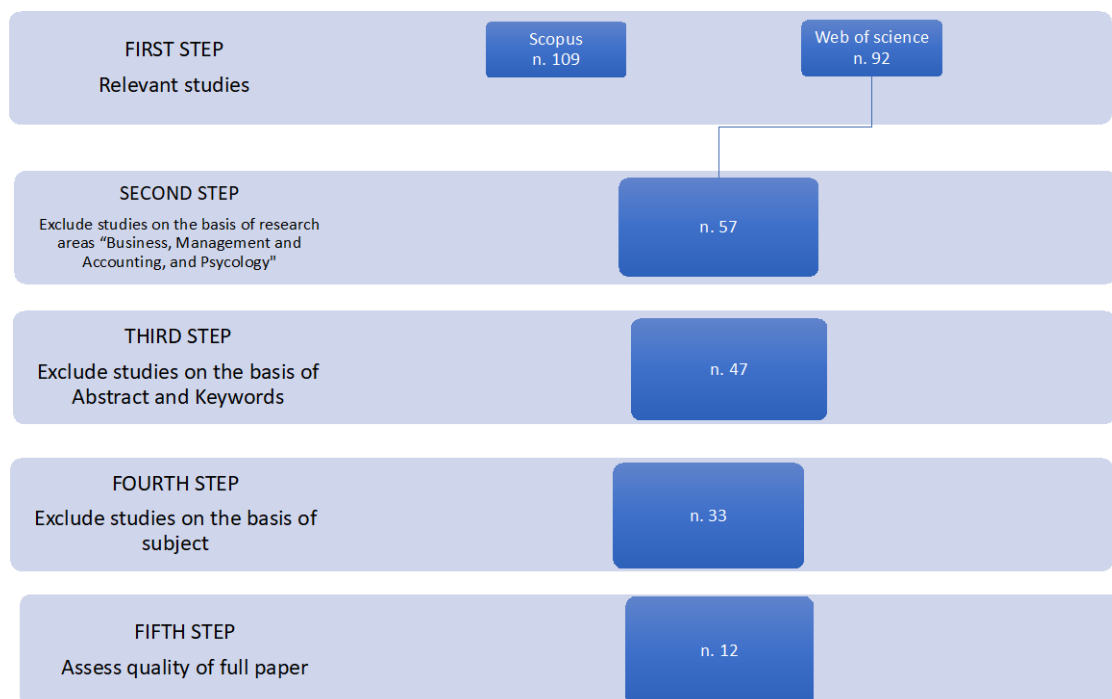
exhaustion among subordinates. According to Carlson et al. (2012), toxic leadership is also positively related to the high level of withdrawal in subordinates. According to the findings of this study, subordinates reported high level of detachment within oneself, depression, hopelessness and detachment with work and role. In sum, three major outcomes in terms of psychological distress due to toxic leadership reported in the literature are loss of self-worth, agitated and withdrawal (Hobman et al., 2009).

### 3. Systematic literature review: toxic leadership, workplace, burnout, turnover intention

To analyse the impact of toxic leadership in workplace we developed a systematic literature review on Scopus and Web of Science, using "Toxic Leadership" as descriptor, used the methodology developed by Ngai and Wat in 2002. A revision protocol has followed: the inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to reveal significant researches for the analysed topic crossed with workplace, burnout and turnover intention. Followed by the critical evaluation, the extraction of the data and the synthesis of the results. The following figure describes in detail the process. Investigation showed that the scientific production includes a total of 109 papers on Scopus and 92 papers on Web of Science. We examined the papers and those that were repeated or out of the scope of our study were excluded. (Figure n. 1)

The first screening process was based on the crossing of two data base, thus 110 papers are embodied in the sample. The second step of analysis were focused on research areas, including "Business, Management and Accounting, and Psychology", the third on "Abstract and Keywords", while in the fourth phase of the process, assessed on the basis of subjects, has produced 12 suitable articles. The academic production, started in 2006 according Scopus and in 2008 for Web of Science, grows in the last three years and were written mainly by American and English authors.

Following this classification, all papers were examined and those that were out of the scope of our study were excluded. This second screening process was based on the analysis of research areas "Business, Management and Accounting, and Psychology" (57 papers).



After a selection focused on "Abstract and Keywords" (47 papers), the result gave 33 relevant articles using a combination of the following keywords: "Human Relation", "Stress", "Risk Management", "Toxicity", "Workplace", "toxic leadership", "Burnout", "Employee", "Organizational Culture", "Perception", "Job satisfaction", "Employment", "Destructive leadership", "Personnel Management"

We classified papers on the basis of analysed items in the researches. Our investigation revealed that the toxic leadership has negative impacts on individual and organizational well-being, performance and organizational commitment, burnout and job exhaustion, and physical health, as shown in Table n.1

AUTHORS	ANALYSED ITEMS	RESULTS OF RESEARCHES
Milosevic, I., Maric, S., & Lončar, D. (2020). Defeating the toxic boss: the nature of toxic leadership and the role of followers. <i>Journal of Leadership &amp; Organizational Studies</i> , 27(2), 117-137. for observed destructive and toxic leadership practices	Emotive impacts	Followers may overcome negative outcomes and neutralize toxic leadership influence via workarounds and learning
Nowack, K., & Zak, P. (2020). Empathy enhancing antidotes for interpersonally toxic leaders. <i>Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research</i> , 72(2), 119.	Health/emotive negative impacts/Organizational resilience	Empathy in leaders favors on important organizational outcomes and overall employee health and well-being
Kaluza, A. J., Boer, D., Buengeler, C., & van Dick, R. (2020). Leadership behaviour and leader self-reported well-being: A review, integration and meta-analytic examination. <i>Work &amp; Stress</i> , 34(1), 34-56.	Impact on well being	There is a considerable linkage between leader well-being and leadership. The adoption of leadership development programmed and organisational health interventions for leaders influence positive impact on employees, teams and organisations.
Hattab, S., Wirawan, H., Salam, R., Daswati, D., & Niswaty, R. (2022). The effect of toxic leadership on turnover intention and counterproductive work behaviour in Indonesia public organisations. <i>International Journal of Public Sector Management</i> .	Impact on burnout	Under a toxic leader, employees might intend to leave the organisations as the employees perceived the psychological contract breach.
Uysal, H. T. (2019). The mediation role of toxic leadership in the effect of job stress on job satisfaction. <i>International Journal of Business</i> , 24(1), 55-73.	Impact on burnout and physical health	Toxic leadership has a negative impact on job stress and burnout
Klahn Acuña, B., & Male, T. (2022). Toxic leadership and academics' work engagement in higher education: A cross-sectional study from Chile. <i>Educational Management Administration &amp; Leadership</i> , 17411432221084474.	Impact on engagement	No evidence of decreased levels of work engagement in the presence of toxic leadership
Wodociąg, S., Dolce, V., & Molino, M. (2021). Cross-border and sedentary workers' job satisfaction. <i>Personnel Review</i> .	Impact on Job satisfaction	Sedentary workers, toxic leadership and job insecurity were significantly negatively related to job satisfaction.
Brouwers, M., & Paltu, A. (2020). Toxic leadership: Effects on job satisfaction, commitment, turnover intention and organisational culture within the South African manufacturing industry. <i>SA Journal of Human Resource Management</i> , 18(1), 1-11	Impact on Job satisfaction	Toxic leadership has negative consequences on employees and the organisations' culture
Bakkal, E., Serener, B., & Myrvang, N. A. (2019). Toxic leadership and turnover intention: Mediating role of job satisfaction. <i>Revista de cercetare si interventie sociala</i> , 66, 88.	Impact on Job satisfaction	Toxic leadership has negatively effects on job satisfaction and turnover intention.
Zaabi, H. H. A., Elanain, H. M. A., & Ajmal, M. M. (2018). Impact of toxic leadership on work outcomes: An empirical study of public banks in the UAE. <i>International Journal of Public Sector Performance Management</i> , 4(3), 373-392.	Impact on Job satisfaction	Toxic leadership in the banking sector has a significant relationship with organisational trust, organisational citizenship behaviour, and group productivity.

Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. <i>The Leadership Quarterly</i> , 24(1), 138-158.	Impact on well being	Leadership is negatively related to positive leader-related concepts and positively related to negative leader-related concepts
Bhandarker, A., & Rai, S. (2019). Toxic leadership: emotional distress and coping strategy. <i>International Journal of Organization Theory &amp; Behaviour</i> .	Physical Health/emotive negative impacts	The loss of self-worth was negatively related with assertive coping.

#### 4. The study: Procedure, Hypotheses, Participants, Scales

In view of the theoretical framework drawn above, the study concentrated on the negative correlates of toxic leadership especially considering its impact on followers' emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions and job satisfaction.

Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H1:** Toxic Leadership is related to followers' emotional exhaustion;

**H2:** Emotional exhaustion is related to turnover intentions;

**H2:** Emotional exhaustion is negatively related to job satisfaction.

Participants were 156 workers selected through a convenience sampling procedure. 40% of them worked in the South of Italy, 37% in the center of Italy and 19% in the North of Italy, only 4% of them worked abroad.

They were invited to fill in an online survey made up by a section useful to gather descriptive information about the participants and then by some self-report scales useful to investigate the hypotheses described. All workers gave their informed consent to data collection according to the European Law 2016/679 and to the Italian Law 196/2003. We asked participants to think about their leader, meant as their direct manager.

The first section of the survey allowed us to describe the socio-professional features of participants that could be summed up as follows.

48% of participants were men and 50% women, 2% non-binary. The age range oscillated between 19 and 63 years old, average age being 31 years old (s.d.=9,46).

As for education, 6% had middle school diploma, 6% a professional qualification, 55% high school diploma, 24% bachelor degree and 8% had a post-graduate degree. The majority of participants had a full time undetermined contract (53%), while the others had a fix term contract (26%), were entrepreneurs (11%), seasonal workers (7%), stagists (3%) and job on call workers (1%).

Finally, 51% of them were dependent workers, 37% were craftsmen, 8% professionals, 6% managers and 4% executives.

The second section of the survey encompassed some self-report scales related to the psycho-social constructs investigated.

- **Emotional Exhaustion.** This variable was measured through the Italian version of the subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Sirigatti, Menoni, & Stefanile, 1988). The subscale is composed by 9 items describing perceptions about the difficulties experienced by participants in managing the emotional side of one's own work (e.g. I feel emotionally dried by my work). Participants were invited to read each statement and to mark their agreement/disagreement with each using a 6 point scale. Internal consistency measured with the Cronbach alpha was very good ( $\alpha = .89$ ).
- **Toxic Leadership.** This variable was measured by the scale developed by Schmidt (2008) composed by 30 items assessing leaders' negative behaviours such as self-promotion, abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, unpredictability narcissism. Participants were invited to think about their supervisor and to mark their agreement/disagreement with each item using a 6-point scale (e.g. My supervisor accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her). Cronbach alpha for this scale was ( $\alpha=.97$ ).

- **Turnover intentions.** This variable was measured with three items developed by Mobley et al. (1978). Participants were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with each using a 7-point scale (e.g. “I have serious intentions to give up this job”). Internal consistency was very good ( $\alpha = .97$ ).
- **Job satisfaction** was measured through a single item developed by Wanous et al. (1997). Participants were invited to answer to the question “How much do you feel satisfied in your job currently?” using a 7-point scale.

## 5. Results

Before investigating the hypotheses, descriptives were run. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for all constructs.

**Table 1:** Means and Standard deviations for all variables (N=156)

	Means	Standard Deviations	N
Emotional exhaustion	2,8348	1,33037	156
Toxic leadership	2,9368	1,37148	156
Turnover intentions	3,3226	2,27230	156
Job satisfaction	4,6282	1,66256	156

Table 2 shows the correlation matrix for all variables that was useful to investigate reciprocal relationships among them. Results showed a negative correlation between toxic leadership and job satisfaction ( $r=-,611^{**}$ ;  $p=.000$ ) a positive correlation between toxic leadership and turnover intention ( $r=,615^{**}$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and between toxic leadership and emotional exhaustion ( $r=,450^{**}$ ;  $p=.000$ ).

**Table 2:** Intercorrelation Matrix (N=156)

\*\*Correlation is significant to 0.01 p value (2-tails).

		Emotional exhaustion	Toxic Leadership	Turnover intentions	Job satisfaction
Emotional exhaustion	Pearson correlations	1	,450**	,615**	-,611**
	Sig. (2-tails)		,000	,000	,000
	N	156	156	156	156
Toxic leadership	Pearson Correlations	,450**	1	,576**	-,394**
	Sig. (2-tails)	,000		,000	,000
	N	156	156	156	156
Turnover intentions	Pearson Correlations	,615**	,576**	1	-,611**
	Sig. (2-tails)	,000	,000		,000
	N	156	156	156	156
Job satisfaction	Pearson Correlations	-,611**	-,394**	-,611**	1
	Sig. (2-tails)	,000	,000	,000	
	N	156	156	156	156

After having checked intercorrelation matrix hypotheses were investigated running linear regression.

H1 supposed that Toxic Leadership was related to followers’ emotional exhaustion. Therefore, a first model was assessed considering toxic leadership as an independent variable and emotional exhaustion as a dependent one. Results confirmed the hypotheses: the model is statistically significant ( $F=39,142$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and the beta value was .450 ( $p=.000$ ).

H2 supposed that emotional exhaustion is related to turnover intentions. This hypothesis was also confirmed. Turnover intentions were significantly related by emotional exhaustion ( $F=93,448$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and the beta values was .615 ( $p=.000$ ).

Finally, the H3 investigated if emotional exhaustion was negatively related to job satisfaction. This model too was proved to be significant ( $F=91,743$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and the beta value was -.611 ( $p=.000$ ).

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

The paper analysed on a twofold perspective the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational impacts, both on theoretical and empirical dimensions.

From a theoretical dimension, it was revealed that the research on this topic is still fragmented, only 13 papers focused on the impacts on individual and organizational well-being, performance and organizational commitment, burnout and job exhaustion, and physical health. This means that this paper could stimulate new and future researches.

On the empirical perspective, we observed the leader, more than anyone else, can potentially create the conditions that directly influence the ability to work better in individuals, being turnover intentions and emotional exhaustion two negative consequences of the person/organization relationship.

We saw, through a regression model, how relevant is the role of the leadership.

The leaders who have an abusive and authoritarian style (toxic) have a negative impact on their subordinates who become, unfortunately, frustrated by work, developing burnout syndrome and the desire to leave work. The regression analysis of the data collected confirmed all the hypotheses, as explained in more detail in the "Results" section.

The emotional state of a leader and his actions affect the mood of the co-workers, thus influencing their individual performance. Consequently, the leader's ability to manage his collaborators is not a private matter, but becomes an essential factor in a firm's success, for organizational performance.

Toxic leaders, according to this study and the analyzed literature, scare off talented people who, one after another, resign, setting out on the search of another job. The turnover, therefore, become as a sort of "safety valve" for those who live an unsatisfactory and deteriorating organizational experience.

In a society characterized by "talent war", in which companies are required to select best talent to survey to the new challenges, attracting and retaining human resources represent the competitive advantage par excellence, the uniqueness that leads the company to success. In order for workers to perform at their best, they need of individual and organizational well-being, working in a quite work place in which they need to feel useful, competent, considered and respected.

Leaders need always to keep in mind that supporting employees allows to improve individual and organizational performance.

## **7. Limitations and future developments**

Although the contribution given by the present study to the investigation of the complex relationships between toxic leadership and some followers' negative behaviours, there are some limitations that could pave the way to future research in the field.

A first limitation was linked to the self-report nature of the measures used that could give a biased view of negative leadership and could only express intentions and perceptions of followers that surely need to be confirmed by some more objective indicators.

A second limitation could be related to the limited and convenience sample that does not allow any generalization of results. Moreover, the present study had a cross-sectional design that restricted the possibility to have a wider view about the evolution of some perceptions and behaviours in the workplace. Therefore, a longitudinal design could be more informative about the development of such negative patterns of behaviours of both leaders and followers in the long run.

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