THE LONG-TERM INFLUENCES OF TOXIC LEADERS ON THEIR FOLLOWERS:
A QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

By
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

Toxic leaders occupy leadership positions across all work sectors in the U.S. and have a significant negative influence on their organizations and followers. Prior research has predominantly focused on the influence of toxic leaders when followers report to them. Scarce research is available to explore the long-term influences of toxic leaders. The current qualitative descriptive study sought to better understand the long-term influences of toxic leaders by listening to participants describe how prior toxic leaders continued to influence them. The data obtained in this study allowed the researcher to identify six categories and 10 subcategories to answer the research question, “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?” The categories that emerged from this qualitative descriptive study included: (1) changing followers as people, (2) current work lives, (3) leadership, (4) self-confidence, (5) ability to trust, and (6) appreciation for current work situation. The identified categories further illuminated the need to eradicate toxic leadership. To help accomplish this task, a Leadership Culture Code (LCC) solution is proposed. The LCC is based on two fundamental tenets. First is the need to establish clear expectations for leaders. Second is the need to empower followers to hold leaders accountable to leadership expectations.

*Keywords:* Toxic leadership, abusive supervision, leadership accountability
Dedication

Many individuals have provided assistance to me along this journey. I am deeply appreciative of these individuals for their love and support. However, this dissertation in practice research study is dedicated to many individuals I do not even know: all followers of toxic leaders. Your voices deserve to be heard, and your experiences matter in how we view leadership. I want to thank the participants in this study who bravely shared their stories and allowed me to learn from them. This dissertation is for you and for others who have shared our experience of reporting to a toxic leader.
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Oh, and I cannot end this section without acknowledging the toxic leader who almost destroyed me but ended up teaching me my real purpose in life. Thank you for teaching me what leadership is not and how harmful it can be when awarded to the wrong person.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Toxic leaders are leaders who typically exhibit dysfunctional personal characteristics and often engage in damaging behaviors (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b). Additionally, toxic leaders are more concerned with power, prestige, and their image than doing what is right for others or an organization (Burns, 2017; Padilla et al., 2007). Unfortunately, toxic leaders occupy leadership positions across all sectors in the United States (Brooks, 2017; Templer, 2018). The current understanding of toxic leadership suggests toxic leaders have a significant negative influence on their organizations and followers (Tepper et al., 2017; Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Although extant literature currently suggests many negative influences of toxic leaders, scarce information exists on the long-term influence of toxic leaders on their followers. In the absence of this knowledge, the development of effective strategies to address the problem of hiring, promoting, and allowing toxic leaders to remain in their positions is difficult. The purpose of this dissertation in practice research was to learn about these influences by conducting a qualitative descriptive study aimed at amplifying the voices of individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders.

Statement of the Problem

According to the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2019), over two-thirds of Americans claim to have worked in a toxic environment. Even more alarming, more than half of these individuals stated their leader was the creator of this toxicity. These statistics, when considered collectively, mean more than one-third of Americans have worked for or are working for a toxic leader (SHRM, 2019). Thus, toxic leadership is prevalent in the United States.
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The widespread existence of toxic leadership is problematic because researchers have linked toxic leadership with many adverse outcomes. To name a few, researchers have found toxic leadership negatively associated with organizational performance (Anjum et al., 2018; MacLennan, 2017; Williams, 2018), organizational learning, and innovation (Kim et al., 2016; Rousseau & Aubë, 2018; Saqib & Arif, 2017a) and organizational commitment (Gardner, 2012; 2016; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Additionally, researchers have linked toxic leadership to lower job satisfaction (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016; Saleh et al., 2018; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015), greater stress (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Williams, 2018), and lower affective well-being for followers (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Fors Brandebo et al., 2016; Han et al., 2017).

Potentially more problematic is the influence toxic leaders have on their followers. This influence is rarely discussed among members of society. Specifically, we have a shared understanding of how toxicity and abuse influence individuals when it occurs in familial or spousal relationships. However, we rarely acknowledge how toxic or abusive relationships with leaders influence individuals while reporting to the leader or after they no longer report a toxic leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, Simon et al., 2015). Scarce research, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Carleton et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017), has been conducted to understand how the abuse experienced when reporting to a toxic leader continues to influence followers after they no longer report to the toxic leader. Therefore, there is a gap in what we know about toxic leadership and its long-term influences. This study strives to explore this real-world problem by describing the influence toxic leaders have on their followers after they no longer report to a toxic leader.
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**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe how followers continue to be influenced by a former toxic leader after the followers no longer report to the toxic leader.

**Research Question**

A collective agreement exists that leaders play an essential role in influencing the behaviors, actions, and attitudes of their followers (Barling, 2014; Fischer et al., 2017). The leaders’ influences are assumed, in many cases, to persist after the followers no longer report to the leaders (Fischer et al., 2017; Keith, 2016). In other words, leadership theories presume current and past leaders influence followers’ current and future behaviors, actions, and beliefs.

Toxic leaders are one type of leader who engage in counterproductive behaviors with their followers (Burns, 2017; Pelletier, 2010; Schmidt, 2008). The current research suggests these counterproductive behaviors negatively influence organizations and followers. For example, research has shown followers of toxic leaders are more likely to engage in counterproductive or harmful behaviors (Boddy, 2014); have higher levels of cynicism (Dobbs & Do, 2019), and engage in coping behaviors to manage the toxic relationship (Webster et al., 2016).

The current literature is plentiful regarding the influences of toxic leaders on their organization and followers. However, despite prior recommendations for exploring the long-term influences of toxic leaders (Fischer et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2017), current research regarding the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers is limited. There are a few studies suggesting toxic leaders influence followers after the follower no
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longer reports to the leader (Carleton et al., 2016; Lian et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2018; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). However, these studies have also failed to address actual feedback from the followers. Specifically, the findings have been based on pre-existing or historical data (Carleton et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018) or have only included data from followers still reporting to their current leader (Lian et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2018; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). Stemming from these findings, the current study aimed to describe how toxic leaders continue to influence their followers after they no longer report to the leader. The following research question guided the current study: “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?”

Aim of the Study

The aim of this dissertation in practice research study was to learn about the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers by listening to the past followers of toxic leaders describe how this experience has influenced them. Once these influences are better understood, the stories of these followers can be used to create change. The researcher used the examples provided by the followers who participated in the current study to create a set of recommendations for organizations and leadership consultants to prevent toxic leadership and minimize its influences. The stories of the followers may also serve to illuminate additional reasons why organizations need to prevent and mitigate toxic leadership in their organizations. Additionally, leadership consultants or coaches can use this knowledge in future trainings to help prevent leaders from engaging in toxic leadership behaviors. Individuals need to understand the true ramifications of behaviors, actions, and people to incite change.
Definition of Relevant Terms

This dissertation in practice research study was focused on learning about the long-term influences of toxic leadership. Specifically, the study centered on how the participants were influenced by the experience of reporting to a toxic leader after they no longer reported to the toxic leader. The participants' stories were used to better describe the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers. The following terms were used operationally within this study:

**Follower:** In this study, this term was operationalized to align with definitions offered by Kellerman (2004) and Lipman-Blumen (2005a) as individuals lower in the hierarchy and have less power than their leaders in an organization.

**Leader:** A person who has individuals reporting to them in an organization. An individual who, by the organization’s structure, has the power to make decisions for others within an organization (Barling, 2014; Bass, 1990; Keith, 2016).

**Toxic Leader:** A leader who exhibits the behaviors and actions associated with toxic leadership as defined in the Toxic Leadership Scale. Specifically, leaders whose abusive, unpredictable, narcissistic, self-promoting, and authoritarian behaviors leave organizations and followers worse than when they found them (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b; Padilla et al., 2007, Schmidt, 2008).

Operationalizing these terms provided a common language to help describe the phenomenon in this study: the influence of previously reporting to a toxic leader. The participant descriptions will help us, as a society, better understand the long-term influence of toxic leaders on their followers. The present knowledge suggests toxic leaders influence their followers after they no longer report to the leader (Liang et al.,
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However, there is a component missing from this research: the voices of the followers. Listening to how followers describe how a previous toxic leader influences them presently will help inform leadership development practices.

Methodology Overview

A qualitative methodology was used for the study. Qualitative methods are most suitable for studies designed to explore a phenomenon to understand or describe it better (Milne & Oberle, 2005). As the researcher wanted to explore the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers and not test variables or relationships, a qualitative method best aligned with the study’s goals. Qualitative descriptive studies are recommended when little is known about the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative descriptive studies are also recommended when the goal is to present the data in straightforward terms, allowing the data to speak for itself without in-depth interpretation (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The researcher sought to obtain a straightforward understanding and present findings in everyday terms, which also strongly aligns with the goals of qualitative descriptive studies (Kim et al., 2017).

To collect data, researchers using a qualitative descriptive study design typically conduct mildly to moderately structured interviews with individuals who have experienced the specified phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000). The participants of this dissertation in practice research study were individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders. The researcher recruited participants by using a combination of network sampling and snowball sampling and selected participants by using a questionnaire based on the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) created by Schmidt (2008). Potential study participants answered questions for two leaders, their past toxic leader and their current
leader. The researcher selected participants who scored their past toxic leader 4.62 or higher on the composite score and their current leader 2.22 or less on the composite score. The researcher selected these cutoff scores based on the data Schmidt cited when creating the TLS. A detailed description of the selection criteria, including the TLS scores and use, is discussed in Chapter Three.

Because leadership transcends disciplines (Bass, 1990), the researcher included participants from various sectors and organizations. Additionally, the researcher purposefully decided not to select participants based on how or when their relationship with their toxic leader ended. Instead, the researcher garnered this information during the study as a data point for considering the long-term influences of toxic leaders. Before conducting this study, the researcher intentionally piloted the interview protocol with individuals whose relationships with toxic leaders ended differently (e.g., terminated, leader terminated) and whose relationships ended within different time periods (e.g., within a year from the interview, seven years from the interview). The researcher was able to find interesting commonalities; thus, the researcher interviewed participants who matched the previously outlined selection criteria and did not consider when or how potential participants’ relationships with their toxic leaders ended in the selection criteria. As illustrated in Chapter Four, despite relationships with toxic leaders that ended differently or within different time periods, the researcher found commonalities in the study’s participants.

Once participants were identified, the researcher scheduled and conducted semi-structured interviews recorded using a video platform (Zoom.com). The researcher utilized open-ended questions to listen to participants describe how their toxic leader
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influenced them after they no longer reported to the leader. While conducting the interviews, the researcher recorded field notes. Field notes assisted in providing contextual information that aided in the authenticity and credibility of the data collected (Milne & Oberle, 2005).

The researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used when researchers wish to derive data directly from the content, and when little is known about a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Staller, 2010). To accomplish this analysis, the researcher utilized a three-stage coding approach. First, the researcher engaged in open coding using In Vivo codes. In Vivo codes are codes that use phrases or words taken directly from the data, amplifying the participants' voices (King, 2008; Saldaña, 2016). Examples of In Vivo codes used in this study were “I’ve lost trust” and “it becomes part of your story.” Once all data was coded, the researcher transitioned to axial coding. Axial coding involved condensing codes using a comparison and higher-order approach (Saldaña, 2016; Williams & Moser, 2019). In the third stage, the researcher utilized selective coding to create categories, broader concepts comprised of the assigned codes that provide a more comprehensive way to describe a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In the current study, categories were developed by the researcher to describe how toxic leaders influenced the participants after they no longer reported to the toxic leader. These categories are presented and discussed in detail in Chapter Four. Additionally, the researcher used these findings to inform the recommendations presented in Chapter Five. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity and bracketing during the entire data analysis process to help account for potential bias.
Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases

Delimitations

Similar to any research study, this dissertation in practice research study was not without delimitations, limitations, and biases. Delimitations are factors that prevent researchers from claiming their research, or the results from their research, can apply to all people (Bryant, 2004). The current study did not seek to understand the influences of toxic leaders on every follower who reported to a toxic leader. Instead, the purpose of the study was to describe the influence toxic leaders have on followers after the followers no longer report to the toxic leader. Thus, it is appropriate to think the results of this study may not apply to individuals who work for another toxic leader or individuals who still work for their toxic leader. Additionally, the study did not seek to understand the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers after followers are no longer working. Because of these delimitations, the study’s results cannot and should not apply to all situations where toxic leadership exists.

Limitations

This dissertation in practice research study was also not without limitations. Specifically, qualitative descriptive studies offer a straightforward description of an understudied phenomenon without having to stay grounded in a specific theory (Sandelowski, 2000, 2009). The lack of a grounding theory in the analysis could be interpreted as a limitation of this study. Additionally, the researcher interviewed 17 participants. This sample size, where appropriate for a qualitative descriptive study, does not allow the researcher to extend these findings broadly. In other words, one of the limitations of this study is the findings’ reliability. Lastly, it is important to note that
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although leadership, by its very nature, spans disciplines, employees in different disciplines or sectors may have different expectations of leadership. Thus, a follower in the field of higher education may have different expectations of their leader than someone who works in construction. These variances could be a further limitation of this study.

**Personal Biases**

In addition to noting the delimitations and limitations of this study, it is essential to note the potential biases that may have affected this study. Biases are opinions a qualitative researcher brings to a study based on past experiences (Creswell, 2016). By having previously experienced the phenomenon in the current study, the researcher brought a bias to this dissertation research study. Specifically, the researcher previously reported to a toxic leader in a prior work environment. In other words, the researcher could be a participant in this study. This experience has fueled the researcher’s interest in toxic leadership and its long-term influences. Whereas the passion the prior experience has provided the researcher is positive, the potential bias it brings to the current study is negative. Thus, the researcher was aware of this bias and took measures such as bracketing, auditing, and member-checking to account for this bias.

**Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner**

Reflection is an integral part of leadership practice as it allows leaders to reflect on their journey and make sense of experiences (Lowney, 2003). This reflection, in turn, allows leaders to grow and advance their leadership competencies. As I critically reflect on my dissertation journey, I reflect on the lessons I have learned during this process. I enrolled in Creighton’s Ed.D. in Interdisciplinary leadership program because the
program boasted a course in toxic leadership, and my goal was to study and learn more about toxic leadership. A personal experience fueled my passion: I had worked for a toxic leader. After I resigned from my toxic environment, I set a goal for myself to bring more awareness to this subject. Specifically, I wanted to help create a conversation around this topic, which is often avoided. Thus, I enrolled in the program to accomplish this lofty goal and planned to research the long-term influences of toxic leadership for my dissertation.

Interestingly, my focus on this goal never wavered during my studies. Instead, as I learned more about leadership and toxic leadership, I became more committed to researching this topic. To accomplish my goal, I had to learn discernment in my dissertation journey; more specifically, I had to discern what mattered most in my study. This caused me to grow as a novice researcher and appreciate constructive feedback even more. Additionally, I learned how to be intelligently skeptical and question the thoughts of other scholars or researchers. As I reflect critically on this journey, I am grateful for the lessons I learned about discernment.

In addition to critically reflecting on the dissertation journey, I am also engaging in anticipatory reflection. Leaders can use anticipatory reflection to think about an upcoming event to prepare for the experience it will bring (Dickel, 2017). Specifically, I think about how this journey will influence my life and career goals. More accurately, I know this is just the start for me. I have learned so much about toxic leadership; however, I know there is so much yet to learn. I am eager to learn more, and, if at all possible, raise awareness about this harmful type of leadership and make a difference. Specifically, I want to help create a conversation around a topic that has too often been avoided. To be
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able to have this conversation, a shared language and understanding needs to exist. I hope my dissertation, future research, and career actions help create what is needed to further the conversations and awareness. I am excited to start working towards this goal.

Summary

Toxic leadership is a destructive type of leadership. The current research shows toxic leadership has a negative influence on organizations and followers. The research also shows toxic leadership is common (Brooks, 2017; SHRM, 2019). Thus, there is a need to understand this form of leadership to bring awareness to how toxic leaders influence organizations and followers. The goal of this dissertation in practice research study was to build on prior research and extend our understanding of this phenomenon by exploring the long-term influence of toxic leaders on their followers. To accomplish the study’s goal, a qualitative descriptive study was used to learn how the past followers of toxic leaders were influenced by reporting to a toxic leader. The following chapter presents a thorough review of the current literature used to inform this study.
A collective agreement exists that leaders play an essential role in influencing the behaviors, actions, and attitudes of their followers (Barling, 2014). In most cases, leadership theorists explain this agreement in positive leadership theories such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1990), inclusive leadership (Bortini et al., 2016), or transformational leadership (Bass, 1990). In these philosophies, we accept and expect our leaders to influence their followers positively. But what happens when the leader is instead a toxic leader? Are followers still influenced? And if so, how do individuals describe this influence?

Toxic leaders are leaders who often engage in counterproductive behaviors with their followers (Burns, 2017; Schmidt, 2008). These counterproductive behaviors typically include demeaning (Tepper, 2000; Whicker, 1996), degrading (Padilla et al., 2007), mocking (Pelletier, 2010), excluding others (Anjum et al., 2018), and blaming others for their mistakes (Çelebi et al., 2015). As a result, toxic leaders leave their followers and organizations worse than when they found them (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b). Researchers have conducted numerous studies to explore how negative leaders influence organizations and followers. However, few studies have been conducted to understand how toxic leaders continue to influence followers after they no longer report to the toxic leader (Carleton et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). These prior studies, toxic leadership definitions, and leadership philosophies were reviewed to inform this dissertation in practice research study.
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The Leader-Follower Relationship

The leader-follower relationship is an important one. In a 2019 study conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), 76% of participants stated their leader set the culture in their organization. These individuals claimed to look to their leader for mentorship, guidance, behavior examples, and support (SHRM, 2019). This high percentage amplifies what leadership theorists have stated for years: the relationship between leaders and followers is a formative and influential one. Numerous positive leadership theories, philosophies, and research exist to support this contention.

Bass (1990) defined transformational leadership as an advanced and inspiring leadership type. Transformational leaders are leaders who inspire growth and positive feelings in their followers by engaging in individualized consideration of followers’ needs, providing an intellectually stimulating environment, inspiring followers’ motivation, and participates in idealized influence (Bass, 1990; Pishgooie et al., 2019). Through transformational leadership practices, it is widely assumed that followers grow.

A different leadership philosophy, servant leadership, centers on followers’ growth. Servant leaders are leaders who lead so they can serve others in a higher capacity (Greenleaf, 1990; Keith, 2016; Kiker et al., 2019). Greenleaf (1990) offered a “best test” for servant leadership: the followers of servant leaders should be more autonomous, healthier, wiser, and more likely to serve themselves because of their relationship with their leader. In other words, followers of servant leaders are typically better people and employees because of their relationship with their leader (Kiker et al., 2019). Transformational and servant leadership are just two of the many leadership types and constructs associated with positive follower outcomes. Inclusive leadership (Bortini et al.,
leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), and authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008) are similar in construct and philosophies. Additionally, leadership has been found to be an antecedent to perceived organizational support (POS) in followers (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

Leadership has been linked to numerous positive outcomes in followers. There is a collective agreement that leaders are responsible for shaping follower perceptions and behaviors when followers are reporting to them. Building on this belief, some contend that the most powerful test of leadership is how the follower is influenced after they no longer report to their leader (Barling, 2014). Greenleaf (1990) argued the influence of the servant leader would continue to positively influence the follower after the leader-follower relationship is no longer intact. These leadership theories support the need to better understand how leaders continue to influence followers.

**Toxic Leadership Definitions and Frameworks**

Toxic leadership and what makes someone a toxic leader is difficult to define (Burns, 2017; Lipman-Blumen, 2005b; Schmidt, 2008; Pelletier, 2010). Defining toxic leadership is difficult because what constitutes good and bad leadership is subjective. After all, followers’ perceptions differ (Lipman-Blumen; 2005b; Tepper, 2000, 2017). To make toxic leadership less abstract, researchers and theorists have offered conceptual and empirical ways to define and identify toxic leaders (see Appendix A for an overview). These toxic leadership definitions are examined.

**Conceptual Definitions**

Conceptual definitions tell individuals what a specific concept means (Creswell, 2016). These definitions are essential as they help guide how and what we think about an
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idea. However, conceptual definitions do not provide ways to measure a concept. Various authors have offered conceptual definitions of toxic leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b; Padilla et al.; 2007; Pelletier, 2010; Reed, 2004; Whicker, 1996).

Whicker, 1996

Whicker (1996) introduced the term toxic leader to describe harmful leaders. Whicker contended three types of leaders existed: trust-worthy, transitional, and toxic. Whicker proclaimed toxic leaders were harmful leaders with six “mals”: maladjusted, malcontent, malevolent, malicious, malfunctional, and engaged in malfeasances. Whicker’s definition of toxic leaders is absolute; she describes toxic leaders as “malicious people who succeed by tearing others down and engage in turf protection” (p. 11).

Reed, 2004

Building from Whicker’s work, the military also defined toxic leadership. The U.S. Army War College led by George Reed asserted toxic leaders were leaders who lacked concern for the well-being of others, displayed interpersonal behaviors that negatively impacted the climate, and were motivated by self-interest (Reed, 2004). Like Whicker, Reed’s definition painted toxic leaders as inherently bad and unfixable. Reed (2004) summarized his definition as “A toxic leader is poison to the unit – an insidious slow-acting poison that complicates diagnosis and application of an antidote.” (p. 71).

Based on a review of the current literature, most toxic leadership theorists and researchers disagree with Whicker and Reed’s contentions that toxic leadership is absolute. Instead, they believe toxic leadership behaviors and actions fluctuate. Because of this understanding, most frameworks include a spectrum of sorts when it comes to
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toxic leaders and their behaviors. Lipman-Blumen (2005b), Padilla et al. (2007), and Pelletier (2010) offer conceptual definitions that encompass this fluctuation and subjectivity.

*Lipman-Blumen, 2005*

In her seminal work, Lipman-Blumen (2005b) ideated toxic leaders vary in toxicity, saying all leaders could be toxic at some point in their career. Lipman-Blumen proclaimed defining toxic leaders complicated because of this fluctuation and because followers’ expectations and perceptions vary. Lipman-Blumen exerted one follower’s favorite leader could be another follower’s toxic leader. These contentions aligned with what Tepper (2000) previously proposed for abusive supervision. Lipman-Blumen created a conceptual framework to define what constitutes toxic leadership. The framework asserted a leader could be considered “toxic” if they engaged in the following actions:

- deliberately harming followers and leaving them worse than when they found them
- violating human rights
- engaging in unethical or illegal activities
- creating allusions to make themselves more powerful
- using followers’ fears to manipulate them
- prohibiting feedback or criticism
- lying
- circumventing systems of justice
- failing to mentor other leaders
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- pitting constituents against one another
- persuading followers to treat others poorly
- failing to identify or address critical problems, and
- accepting incompetence or wrongdoings (pp. 2-3).

*Padilla et al., 2007*

Padilla et al. (2007) expanded upon Lipman-Blumen’s work through creating a conceptual framework, the toxic triangle, to describe the relationship between toxic leaders, followers, and conducive environments. Padilla et al. defined toxic leaders as narcissistic and charismatic leaders who have a personalized need for power and have an ideology of hate. Padilla et al. explained these toxic leaders could vary in their ability to inflict harm. Specifically, the researchers shared followers and environments play a critical role in the “success” of a toxic leader. In the toxic triangle, followers can conform or collude with their leaders, and environments with fewer checks and balances can empower toxic leaders (see Appendix A).

*Pelletier, 2010*

Pelletier (2010) sought to understand if followers’ perceptions of toxic leaders’ actions aligned with Lipman-Blumen’s contentions and if there was consensus on what constitutes toxic leadership. Pelletier's results showed support for Lipman-Blumen’s framework but contradicted Lipman-Blumen’s assertion that one person's toxic leader could be another's hero. Pelletier concluded people generally agreed eight behaviors, which Pelletier called dimensions, were associated with toxic leaders. Pelletier’s dimensions included: attacks on follower's self-esteem, lacking integrity, abusiveness,
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social exclusion, divisiveness, promoting inequity, threatening security, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors.

**Empirical Definition**

The previously mentioned researchers were instrumental in introducing and defining the concept of toxic leadership; however, their definitions lacked the empirical-testing aspect needed in research. To add specificity to what constitutes toxic leadership and to supply an instrument to measure toxic leadership, Schmidt (2008) created the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS). Schmidt constructed his scale from the abusive supervision scale (Tepper, 2000) and definitions of toxic leadership, including Lipman-Blumen’s. The TLS used five dimensions to measure toxic leadership: abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. Schmidt further expanded on each of these dimensions by describing behaviors indicative of each dimension (see Appendix B). Researchers have since used the TLS to survey individuals about their perceptions of toxicity in leaders (Berdahl et al., 2018; Çelebi et al., 2015; Dobbs & Do, 2019). Using a Likert scale approach for agreement rating, the TLS allows researchers to determine the relative degree of a leader’s toxicity through each dimension and an overall TLS composite score (Schmidt, 2008).

**Related Negative Leadership Concepts and Terms**

Whicker, Reed, Lipman-Blumen, Padilla et al., Pelletier, and Schmidt were not the only researchers defining negative types of leadership. Researchers, such as Tepper (2000), Kellerman (2004), and Einarsen et al. (2007), defined similar yet distinct types of negative leadership (Burns, 2017; Pelletier, 2010, Schmidt 2008). Researchers have often used abusive supervision, bad leadership, and destructive leadership to study leaders who
also could be considered toxic leaders. As there are overlaps of these concepts with toxic leadership, the researcher deemed it essential to review and understand these related concepts.

**Abusive Supervision**

*Tepper, 2000*

Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 178). Like Lipman-Blumen (2005b), Tepper exerted followers’ perceptions defined abusive supervision; thus, a leader could be perceived abusive by one follower and not by another. To help measure this continuum, Tepper created a 15-item scale to measure followers’ perceptions of abusive supervision. Schmidt (2008) used Tepper’s scale as the basis for the TLS and added two dimensions: self-promotion and unpredictability. Thus, there are some differences between the empirical definitions of abusive supervision and toxic leadership. However, from a broad lens, the two terms are similar and often used interchangeably (Milosevic et al., 2019).

**Bad Leadership**

*Kellerman, 2004*

Kellerman (2004) argued individuals needed to understand the distinct types of negative leaders they were likely to experience. Kellerman presented seven different types of bad leaders: incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil. She argued each of these leaders were motivated by different reasons and, as a result, were unique types of bad leaders. Kellerman’s descriptions of bad leaders align with
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Lipman-Blumen’s conceptual framework in that both present a range of harmful leader types.

Destructive Leadership

Einarsen et al., 2007

Einarsen et al. (2007) defined destructive leadership as “the systematic and repeated behavior 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 their subordinates” (p. 208). Destructive leadership differs from abusive supervision in that destructive leadership includes harmful physical acts. Einarsen et al. included behaviors such as shoving, sexual harassment, and throwing things. These behaviors, while excluded in abusive supervision, were included in toxic leadership. Another way destructive leadership is like toxic leadership is both leadership types contend organizations and followers can be harmed in different manners and degrees.

Definition Summary

Whicker, Reed, Lipman-Blumen, Padilla et al., Pelletier, and Schmidt, played essential roles in defining toxic leadership (see Appendix A for an overview of all definitions). Each researcher added to our understanding of what constitutes toxic leadership. These definitions and frameworks overlap in various ways with abusive supervision, bad leadership, and destructive leadership. Whereas each of these negative concepts varies from one another, a common theme emerges: inflicting harm. Although these researchers offer diverse ways of defining and measuring this harm, one could summarize toxic leaders as leaders who harm their followers or organizations through
engaging in counterproductive behaviors. Researchers use these definitions to study toxic leadership and how toxic leadership influences followers and organizations.

**Toxic Leadership Influences**

Building from the definitions explored in the previous section, toxic leaders are leaders who harm their organizations and followers. Studies show toxic leaders inflict harm in at least two ways: organizational and individual (Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Other studies suggest influences occur at the relational level (Pelletier, 2012; Wright, 2015).

*Organizational harms* are adverse effects impacting the overall health of organizations; *individual harms* are adverse effects primarily experienced by an individual or a small group. While organizational and individual harms differ, they also can influence each other. For example, the stress felt by one individual can lead to turnover, which can negatively impact the organization’s performance (Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Additionally, relationships can influence how the harms are perceived (Farh & Chen, 2014). This dissertation in practice research study’s question aligns with understanding individual harms; thus, the majority of the studies reviewed focus on individual harms. However, understanding organizational harms and relational influences are important because of the previously noted overlap and because this study aims to provide organizations with strategies to mitigate the influence of toxic leaders. Because of these two factors, the researcher decided to include studies focusing on organizational harms and relational influences in this review. The studies reviewed in this section aided the researcher in identifying the types of organizational harms, individual harms, and relational influences related to toxic leadership.
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Organizational Harms

Over the years, researchers have attempted to understand how toxic leaders influence organizations by exploring the relationship between toxic leaders and organizational behavior and outcomes. Researchers have found negative relationships between toxic leadership and organizational performance (Anjum et al., 2018; MacLennan, 2017; Williams, 2018), organizational innovation (Kim et al., 2016; Rousseau & Aubé, 2018), and organizational citizenship behavior (Behery et al., 2018). Additionally, researchers have found positive relationships between toxic leadership and organizational cynicism (Dobbs & Do, 2019), and counterproductive workplace behavior (Boddy, 2014; Lita, 2018). Aligned with systems thinking, some organizational studies contained individual harms. The foundation of systems thinking lies in dynamic complexity and the connectedness between levels (Paxton & Frost, 2018). Individual behaviors, actions, or, in this case, harms can influence the greater organization or system. As a result, some of the organizational harms listed in this section were influenced by individual harms or could influence individual harms. Nonetheless, the current literature supports the contention toxic leaders harm organizations.

Organizational Performance

Whicker (1996) and Lipman-Blumen (2005a) argued toxic leaders could positively influence organizational performance in the short-term; however, in the long-term, toxic leaders would cost their organizations. Toxic leaders could incite action by forcefully demanding their followers to perform and, in turn, the followers would increase their productivity for a specific time period (Farmanara, 2019). However, followers, after this short stint of increasing their performance, would decrease their
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efforts and, as a result, negatively affect organizational performance (Farmanara, 2019).

These contentions align with the results from the 2017 Life Meets Work survey. Of the
1,000 college-educated employees surveyed, 56% reported having worked for a toxic
leader (Brooks, 2017). These individuals also reported higher turnover intentions,
absenteeism, and reduced productivity. As a result, it was estimated toxic leaders cost
organizations more than $23.8 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover, legal costs, and
reduced productivity (Brooks, 2017). The Society of Human Resource Management
(2019) offered an even higher figure; estimating toxic work environments have cost
organizations $223 billion over the past five years.

MacLennan (2017) studied the financial ramifications of a toxic leader on a
smaller scale by conducting a case study of a Florida real estate company lead by a toxic
leader. MacLennan found the toxic leader was successful at improving revenues; but also
increased organizational costs. To determine the costs, MacLennan used the same cost
drivers that the Life Meets Work Survey did: turnover, decreased productivity, and
increased absenteeism. Based on these costs, MacLennan calculated the leader cost the
real estate company $197,976 during their tenure at the real estate company.

The Life Meets Work Survey, the SHRM survey, and MacLennan considered
employee productivity when estimating the costs associated with toxic leadership. Anjum
et al. (2018) researched the relationship between toxic leadership, job burnout, and job
productivity at seven Pakistani universities. Anjum et al. found burnout mediated the
relationship between toxic workplace dimensions and job productivity. Williams (2018)
also found toxic leadership linked to lower job productivity in a quantitative correlational
study in defense and federal workplaces. Like the aforementioned researchers, Williams
discovered individuals who experienced toxic leadership behaviors were less productive and motivated than those who did not experience toxic leadership behaviors.

MacLennan (2017), Anjum et al. (2018), and Williams (2018) found toxic leadership behaviors linked to organizational performance by evaluating organizational costs and cost drivers. In a different type of study, Saqib and Arif (2017b) researched a potential link between toxic leadership and employees’ perceptions of organizational performance. By surveying 445 individuals working in banks in Pakistan, the researchers found a significant negative relationship between toxic leadership and the participants’ perception of organizational performance. The more the participants perceived the leaders to be toxic, the worse the participants believed the organization was performing.

Contrary to the previous studies, Wright (2015) found sometimes toxic leaders could achieve good results. Wright conducted a case study of one squadron in the Australian army lead by a toxic leader. The leader in the study lacked concern for employees, was controlling, and was described as a toxic leader. Yet, despite these behaviors, the squadron achieved fantastic results, including a commendation for distinguished performance. Wright observed the team banded together outside of the leader, and the cohesion led to strong results. Wright’s observation supported the notion of relational influence, which is further explored in the Relational Influences section of this chapter. Wright also concluded toxic leadership, despite the results in this one case study, should not be assumed to influence organizational performance positively.

Organizational Learning and Innovation

Another factor widely accepted to drive organizational performance is organizational learning and innovation. Organizations need to be able to innovate to
advance their organizations and remain competitive (Rousseau & Aubé, 2018). Several researchers have sought to understand how toxic leadership relates to an organization’s ability to innovate. The researchers have studied the relationship in a variety of ways including, organizational learning (Saqib & Arif, 2017a), information sharing (Kim et al., 2016), reports of innovations (Rousseau & Aubé, 2018), and employee creativity (Han et al., 2017).

In a study, which appears linked to the study previously mentioned, Saqib and Arif (2017a) researched the relationship between toxic leadership, employee silence, and organizational learning. Saqib and Arif surveyed individuals working in banks in Pakistan and discovered when employee silence was present, a significant negative relationship existed between toxic leadership and organizational learning. The researchers concluded toxic leadership influenced employees’ willingness to share ideas and that silence affected organizational learning. This study also illustrates how relational level behaviors influenced organizational harm. When the employees were silent and not sharing ideas on a relational level, organizational learning suffered.

Kim et al. (2016) also wondered how negative leadership and learning interacted. The researchers studied abusive supervision’s relationship to knowledge sharing and how learning goal orientation moderated this relationship. The researchers found, through studying 245 employee and supervisor dyads in South Korea, abusive supervision was negatively related to knowledge sharing, and employee learning goal orientation moderated the relationship. Employees who took ownership of their learning were less likely to stop sharing information in the presence of abusive supervisors than those who relied on others for learning motivation (Kim et al., 2016). Rosseau and Aubé (2018) also
found employees who were more self-directed to be less influenced by abusive supervision. Rosseau and Aubé studied 82 work teams at a public safety organization in Canada and found proactive behavior moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and innovation. Kim et al. and Rousseau and Aubé concluded abusive supervision negatively affected innovation and learning; however, self-reliant and self-directed employees were less affected by abusive leadership than employees who relied on the organization for motivation.

In their study of 222 employees at high-tech organizations in China, Han et al. (2017) examined the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity. Han et al.’s findings did not show a direct relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity; however, the researchers found abusive supervision positively related to the individual harms of emotional exhaustion and sleep deprivation. The researchers found emotional exhaustion fully mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity. Han et al. concluded employee creativity would be negatively affected by abusive supervision because employees slept less and were more emotionally exhausted.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Behery et al. (2018) examined the influence of toxic leadership on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) by studying toxic leadership’s relationship with OCB. Behery et al. conducted a quantitative correlational study of employees working in firms in the United Arab Emirates. The researchers’ results indicated toxic leadership behaviors were significantly negatively related to affiliation-based and challenge-oriented OCB.
Boddy (2014) explored the opposing concept of organizational citizenship behavior: counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB). Before discussing Boddy’s study, it is crucial to explain the link between corporate psychopathy and toxic leaders. Padilla et al. (2007) discussed this relationship in their seminal conceptual framework, the toxic triangle. They argued corporate psychopaths are one type of toxic leader and, because of their lack of remorse, are often the most extreme toxic leader (Padilla et al., 2007). Boddy examined the relationship between the presence of corporate psychopaths and CWB. Boddy surveyed 304 professional workers in Britain and found the presence of a corporate psychopath significantly correlated with an increase in CWBs, including bullying and workplace conflict. The findings of this study were similar to an earlier study conducted by Boddy. Boddy (2011) examined the relationship between corporate psychopath presence, unfair supervision, and workplace bullying in a study of 346 senior-level leaders in Australian organizations. In this study, Boddy found both corporate psychopaths and unfair supervisors affected workplace bullying. The prevalence of bullying in the workplace was higher than expected when either type of negative leader was present.

Boddy was not the only researcher who found a significant relationship between negative leadership behaviors and conflict. Lita (2018) tested the validity of the TLS by studying the level of conflict in different Romanian military units. Lita compared a high-conflict and low-conflict unit and found the members of the high-conflict unit rated their leaders significantly more toxic than those of the low-conflict unit. Richard et al. (2018) also studied the relationship between abusive supervisors and abusive behaviors. The researchers found the followers of abusive leaders had higher turnover intentions and, as
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a result, were more likely to engage in abusive behaviors while at work. Boddy’s, Lita’s, and Richard et al.’s research supports the notion individuals are more likely to engage in CWBs if they perceive their leaders were engaging in CWBs. Toxic leaders, by definition, are leaders who engage in CWBs.

Organizational Cynicism

Padilla et al. (2007) argued toxic leaders could make followers feel more cynical about their organizations and positions. Dobbs and Do (2019) examined the relationship between toxic leadership and cynicism in their mixed methods study of military cadets. The results of the study indicated cadets who reported having a toxic leader were more likely to distrust the organization and have negative feelings about the organization. Dobbs and Do’s findings aligned with Vogel et al.’s findings. Vogel et al. (2015) researched the perceptions of abusive supervision in different cultures and the consequences of those perceptions. The researchers found followers in Anglo cultures who perceived higher levels of abusive supervision were less likely to trust their leader and their organization.

Individual Harms

Toxic leaders not only harm organizations, but toxic leaders also harm followers at an individual level (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a; Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Researchers have attempted to understand how toxic leaders influence individual behaviors and outcomes, while individuals report to toxic leaders. Current studies include research exploring the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016; Saleh et al., 2018; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015), organizational commitment (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Reed & Bullis, 2009), turnover intentions
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(Bakkal et al., 2019; Fors Brandebo et al., 2019), stress (Berdahl et al., 2018; Williams, 2018), and affective well-being (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Lopes et al., 2019). As followers often need to adapt their behaviors to mitigate the influences of toxic leadership, researchers have also studied followers’ coping strategies (Webster et al., 2016). The studies in this section illustrate what the current literature says about the individual harms toxic leaders cause when followers report to toxic leaders.

**Job Satisfaction**

Researchers have found a significant negative relationship between toxic leadership and followers’ job satisfaction. Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) studied toxic leaders’ influence on followers through surveying individuals in leadership positions in diverse organizations in India. Mehta and Maheshwari found participants who rated their leaders higher in toxic leadership behaviors were less satisfied with their job. Schmidt (2008) found comparable results when testing the Toxic Leadership Scale among professionals working for various organizations in the United States.

Similarly, Reed and Bullis (2009) studied the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction with highly tenured military personal and civilian service members. Saleh et al. (2018) conducted a phenomenological study to explore how nurse managers’ leadership styles affected floor nurses’ job satisfaction. Gardner (2012) conducted a mixed methods study to research female faculty members’ job satisfaction. Woestman and Wasonga (2015) studied the relationship between destructive leadership behaviors and job satisfaction in K-12 teachers in Illinois. Like the previously mentioned studies, Reed and Bullis,’ Saleh et al.’s, Gardner’s, and Woestman and Wasonga’s findings suggested a relationship between perceived toxic or destructive leadership
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behaviors and job satisfaction. In each of these studies, the more individuals perceived their leader to have toxic leader characteristics, the less satisfied they were with their job.

Mathieu and Babiak (2016) also researched the effect of toxic leadership behaviors on job satisfaction. Mathieu and Babiak’s study, conducted in a non-profit organization, investigated the relationship between corporate psychopathy, abusive supervision, and job satisfaction. Mathieu and Babiak found a strong significant relationship between corporate psychopathy and abusive supervision; they also found followers of abusive supervisors were less satisfied.

Uysal (2019) researched the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction in a different manner. Instead of studying toxic leadership as the dependent variable, Uysal considered toxic leadership as a possible mediating variable in the relationship between job stress and job satisfaction. The researcher surveyed 124 individuals working in the public sector in Turkey and found toxic leadership partially mediated the relationship. Uysal concluded other variables beyond toxic leadership should also be considered when examining the relationship between job stress and satisfaction. Fors Brandebo et al.’s (2019) research supported the notion other factors beyond leadership affected job satisfaction. Fors Brandebo et al. tested constructive or destructive leadership behaviors as predictors of soldiers’ job satisfaction in Sweden. The results showed only 36.3% of job satisfaction was explained by leadership. Similar to Uysal, Fors Brandebo et al. concluded toxic leadership affected job satisfaction; however, it was not the only reason for lower job satisfaction.
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Organizational Commitment and Turnover Intentions

In addition to researching the link between toxic leadership and job satisfaction, Mehta and Maheshwari (2013), Mathieu and Babiak (2016), Gardner (2012), and Reed and Bullis (2009) studied the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational commitment. Mehta and Maheshwari found followers of toxic leaders to have lower organizational commitment. Mathieu and Babiak achieved similar results: abusive supervision was related to higher turnover intentions and lower job satisfaction. Similarly, Gardner found negative perceptions of leadership related to the decision to leave the organization.

Building off the prior studies linking toxic leadership to job satisfaction and turnover intentions, Bakkal et al. (2019) asked if job satisfaction mediated the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intentions. To answer this question, the researchers conducted a quantitative correlational study at three university hospitals in Turkey. The researchers found job satisfaction played a mediating role. They concluded the hospital employees who perceived toxic leadership felt less satisfied and therefore were more likely to look for another position.

Interestingly, two groups of researchers achieved results contradictory to the studies mentioned above. In addition to studying the relationship between destructive leadership behaviors (DLBs) and job satisfaction, Woestman and Wasonga (2015) researched the relationship between DLBs and turnover intentions. Unexpectedly, the researchers found the teachers who perceived more DLBs were more likely to stay in their position, although they were less satisfied. Woestman and Wasonga hypothesized this occurred because the level of DLBs was relatively low. Reed and Bullis (2009) also
found no relationship between toxic leadership and followers’ inclination to remain in service. The researchers hypothesized the lack of relationship was potentially unique to the military. Reed and Bullis asserted military personnel differ from employees of civilian organizations because they have a desire to serve their country regardless of the work conditions.

Fors Brandebo et al. (2019) also studied the turnover intentions of military personnel and experienced different findings than Reed and Bullis. Specifically, Fors Brandebo et al. asked whether constructive or destructive leadership actions affected the turnover intentions more in military personnel in Sweden and the Netherlands. The researchers found destructive leadership motivated the soldiers more to leave than constructive leadership motivated the soldiers to stay.

Like military personnel, clergy members are typically called to service. In his grounded theory study, Joynt (2017) shared clergy in churches located in South Africa typically accepted positions because of their desire to serve the communities. However, this calling was often not enough to retain clergy members. Joynt studied the process clergy members used when deciding to leave their positions and found the decision to leave often centered around toxic leadership. Specifically, the clergy members reported feeling disappointed in the leaders and stated the leaders behaved in “ungodlike” ways. Yaghi (2019) wondered if another group’s organizational commitment would be unaffected by toxic leadership for another reason: its benefits. Yaghi questioned if senior leaders’ commitment to their organizations would be driven by compensation packages, relationship to decision making, and position prestige instead of leadership. Yaghi found, by interviewing seven senior leaders in diverse sectors, the participants’ organizational
commitment was significantly negatively related to toxic leadership. Joynt and Yaghi concluded factors that could drive individuals to choose a particular position often would not be enough to retain the same individuals if toxic leadership was present.

**Stress**

The results of the reviewed literature, with one notable exception (Berdahl et al., 2018), showed toxic leaders influenced followers’ stress. Hadadian and Zarei (2016) conducted a study of knowledge workers in banks to understand the relationship between toxic leaders and job stress. The researchers found toxic leadership to be positively related to reported job stress. Williams (2018) also studied stress and toxic leadership. Williams found individuals who experienced toxic leadership worried more and felt more stress than those who did not experience toxic leadership. Tepper et al. (2007) studied followers' upward communication strategies with abusive supervisors in relation to stress. The researchers found, in a two-phased correlational study of 342 full-time employees, psychological distress was exacerbated when followers used regulative maintenance communications. In a study related to stress, Enalls-Fenner (2017) explored how toxic leaders affected followers' sensemaking. Sensemaking assists individuals in processing negative occurrences and, as a result, helps reduce stress levels (Enalls-Fenner, 2017). The researcher interviewed 21 organizational leaders in South Dakota and found individuals who perceived their environments as toxic were less likely to engage in sensemaking.

By comparison, Berdahl et al. (2018) did not find toxic leadership related to higher stress levels. The primary purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between masculine cultures and toxic leadership; however, Berdahl et al. also asked
questions to understand how these phenomena affected work/life conflict and job stress. The researchers found toxic leadership was partially related to work/life conflict; however, the data did not support a direct relationship between toxic leaders and stress. The researchers discussed the importance of further research to better understand the relationship between toxic leaders and their followers’ stress levels.

**Affective Well-Being**

Lipman-Blumen (2005a) argued the mental and physical well-being of followers suffered because of toxic leaders. This belief was supported by research as participants in various studies reported being sick more often (Boddy, 2014), feeling depressed or being diagnosed with depression (Dobbs & Do, 2019), or being emotionally exhausted (Fors Brandebo et al., 2016; Han et al., 2017). Additionally, toxic leadership has been found to be related to negative mental health in followers (Montano et al., 2017), higher levels of paranoia (Lopes et al., 2019), and higher reports of problematic drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006). Moreover, Fors Brandebo et al. (2016) found the adverse effects on emotional exhaustion associated with destructive leaders greater than the positive effects of constructive leaders. These studies support the notion toxic leaders negatively influence followers’ affective well-being.

**Coping Strategies**

According to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) seminal work, coping is a process requiring individuals to continuously change behavior and cognitive efforts to manage demands that exceed individuals’ current resources. Because individuals are constantly changing their efforts in coping, coping creates additional stress or strain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within the context of toxic leadership, individuals change their
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behaviors or thought processes to cope with negative emotions or stress associated with toxic leadership (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019).

Bhandarker and Rai (2019) researched coping strategies and found the followers of toxic leaders were more likely to use either adaptive or avoidance strategies. The researchers did not find either of these strategies to be useful as followers reported significant levels of frustration, irritation, anger, and insecurity. Milosevic et al. (2019) found, by conducting multiple case studies, followers of toxic leaders attempted to cope with the leader by creating workarounds to avoid the leader. The followers, as a result, reported feeling demotivated and powerless. Webster et al. (2016) also sought to understand how followers cope with toxic leaders. The researchers surveyed 76 individuals from various organizations in Australia and New Zealand. The results showed individuals who reported to toxic leaders were likely to engage in four coping activities: seeking social support, taking leave from, or leaving the organization, challenging the leader, or ruminating. The results did not allow the researchers to determine the effectiveness of the coping strategies.

Relational Influences

Webster et al. (2016) noted the followers of toxic leaders often coped by seeking support from others. Specifically, the followers coped by commiserating with or relating to colleagues who were also experiencing the same toxic leader. This coping strategy aligned with Lipman-Blumen’s (2005a) contention the followers of toxic leaders should band together to support one another, confront the leader, or engage in whistleblowing activities as a collective unit. Lipman-Blumen argued meaningful relationships with colleagues were essential to lessen the negative influence toxic leaders had on their
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followers. Lipman-Blumen’s contentions align with the concept of the individual, relational, and collective self. It is widely accepted individuals evaluate their worth in three levels: individual self, relational self, and the collective self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The individual self pertains to characteristics unique to the individual, the relational self refers to the characteristics shared with others close to them, and the collective self refers to the characteristics that an individual shares with a meaningful group such as an organization (Nehrlich et al., 2019).

While the majority of the studies reviewed focused on the individual and collective levels, three studies illustrated the importance of the relationship level. Farh and Chen (2014) and Wright (2015) found relationships at the team level minimized the influence of toxic leadership. Aligning with the relational self-concept, Farh and Chen wondered if individuals would feel better about themselves if they witnessed abusive supervision at the team-level in addition to experiencing it at the individual level. The researchers found the participants who reported observing abusive supervision at both the team-level and individual-level felt better about themselves than those who only observed abusive supervision only at the individual level. The researchers concluded followers could tolerate abusive supervision better when the followers understood abusive supervision behaviors were not solely directed at them as individuals. Similarly, Wright found the relationships between toxic leader’s followers mattered. In the previously mentioned study, Wright found a team could achieve great success despite their toxic leader when they banded together. Wright concluded the soldiers formed strong relationships with each other to work around the toxic leader and support one another in
their efforts. The researcher concluded support from team members allowed the group to perform at a high level, despite the toxic leader.

Unlike Farh and Chen (2014) and Wright (2015), who studied the relationships between followers, Pelletier (2012) studied the importance of the relationship between the toxic leader and a follower. Specifically, Pelletier examined how followers’ relationships with a leader affected perceptions of toxicity and the likelihood of challenging the leader. By conducting a quantitative experimental study, Pelletier discovered participants were less likely to perceive a leader as toxic if the participants considered the leader as part of their in-group. Additionally, the participants were less likely to challenge in-group leaders. Interestingly, the participants’ perceptions changed concerning toxicity when the leader was not part of their immediate group, or when they did not have an established relationship with the leader. Pelletier concluded followers’ relationships with leaders influenced their perceptions of toxicity in leaders.

Toxic Leadership Influence Summary

Burns (2017), Lipman-Blumen (2005a, 2005b), and Weberg and Fuller (2019) contended that toxic leaders harm organizations and their followers. Researchers have conducted numerous studies to understand these influences better. Current literature suggests that toxic leaders harm organizations by influencing organizational performance (Anjum et al., 2018), organizational learning and innovation (Rousseau, & Aubé, 2018), organizational citizenship behavior (Behery et al., 2018), and cynicism (Dobbs & Do, 2019). Current literature also illustrates that toxic leaders harm individuals by influencing job satisfaction (Saleh et al., 2018), organizational commitment (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013), turnover intentions (Fors Brandebo et al., 2019), stress (Williams, 2018), affective
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well-being (Lopes et al., 2019), and coping strategies (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019). Additionally, the literature suggests the relationships between followers and with toxic leaders influenced perceptions and harms (Farh and Chen, 2014). When considered collectively, these studies support the contention toxic leaders harm organizations and followers when toxic leaders are engaged with the organization and followers.

The Long-Term Influence of Toxic Leadership

As seen in the prior section, a vast amount of literature exists to describe the influences of toxic leadership. These studies center around the relationships of toxic leaders with organizations or followers at one point in time. Furthermore, the studies centered around the followers’ perceptions of their leaders when the followers reported to the toxic leaders. The literature is much scarcer when it comes to the long-term influences of toxic leadership (Carleton, 2016; Oh & Farh, 2017). Despite the widespread agreement leaders shape the behaviors and attitudes of their followers after followers no longer report to the leader, studies researching this influence are relatively uncommon (Barling, 2014). The current literature about the long-term influence of toxic leadership, though scarce, centers around the need for additional research and negative time-lagged influences.

Need for Additional Research

Two groups of researchers, Tepper et al. (2017) and Fischer et al. (2017), conducted reviews of current literature to determine future research agendas. In both articles, the researchers called for additional research to understand the long-term influences of leaders on their followers. Tepper et al. came to this conclusion after reviewing abusive supervision articles published between 2001 and 2015. Tepper et al.
found a lack of research about the phenomenological experience of having been abused by a leader. As a result, Tepper et al. contended studies with research questions centering around how abusive supervision influences followers’ perceptions about other types of leadership were needed. Tepper et al. called for more studies with time lags to build a more robust and bolder picture of how abusive supervision influences followers.

Unlike Tepper et al., Fischer et al. (2017) did not just review abusive supervision articles to create their research agenda. Fischer et al. reviewed 205 leadership articles in journals with high impact scores. From this review, Fischer et al. concluded more research was needed in the area of time lags. Explicitly, the researchers stated leadership influences, much like training, unfolds over time. Fischer et al. contended behavior and belief changes develop more slowly than emotions or cognitions. Because of this, the researchers stated additional research was needed to understand how leadership behaviors influence followers in the long-term. Fischer et al. contended more studies were needed aid in our understanding of how followers are influenced by leaders outside of the time they reported to the leader.

**Time Lagged Influences**

Five leadership studies that have attempted to research the long-term influence of toxic leadership include Schmidt et al. (2018), Liang et al. (2018), Carleton et al. (2016), Lian et al. (2014), and Vogel and Mitchell (2017). Alternatively, Ford et al. (2014) attempted to understand the long-term influence of a related phenomenon, namely occupational stress. These studies illustrate manners in which toxic leadership could influence followers after they no longer report to their toxic leader.
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Using data previously collected from 884 participants in the MONICA/KORA study, Schmidt et al. (2018) devised a longitudinal correlational study to examine the relationship between the lack of supportive leadership behavior, job strain, and the self-reported health of followers 10 years after the lack of support. Schmidt et al. defined supportive leadership behavior (SLB) as leadership behaviors associated with resolving difficult situations and reducing stress for followers. As demonstrated in the prior sections, toxic leaders cause difficult situations and increase stress; thus, toxic leadership behaviors would not be considered SLBs. Schmidt et al. found a significant negative relationship between SLBs, job strain, and suboptimal self-related health in males. More precisely, male participants who reported lower perceptions of SLBs 10 years previously reported lower levels of their health.

Liang et al. (2018) also studied the relationship between negative leadership behaviors and followers’ health. Liang et al. used a longitudinal cross-lagged research design to test the relationship between supervision, rumination, and followers’ health. The researchers found, by collecting data at three points in a year (T1, T2, T3), rumination fully mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and employee health. Specifically, Liang et al.’s results showed abusive supervision at T1 predicted rumination at T2, and rumination at T2 predicted somatic complaints at T3. Liang et al. stated their study supported the notion abusive supervision has long-term effects on followers, and more research was needed better to understand abusive supervision’s influences concerning time.

Alternatively, Carleton et al. (2016) researched the long-term influences of toxic leadership by studying the career-long effects of abusive coaches on professional
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basketball player aggression and task performance. Carleton et al. used a histometric analysis process to study 693 basketball players who reported to 57 different coaches over six years. The researchers found abusive supervision consistently associated with increased aggression, measured by technical fouls. Additionally, the players who reported to an abusive coach at some point during the six years had lower task performance, measured by points scored, rebounds, assists, and other key basketball performance metrics, than those who did not. Carleton et al. stated their findings suggested the influences of abusive leadership extend longer than often acknowledged in research.

Before discussing the next study, it is essential to note the connection between workplace deviance and a concept previously discussed, counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB). Workplace deviance, which includes misuse of time and resources, is considered one dimension of counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) (Gruys & Sackett, 2003). In the study discussed in the Organizational Harms section of this chapter, Boddy (2014) considered workplace deviance as one aspect of CWB. Lian et al. (2014) also studied workplace deviance by researching the reciprocal relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Lian et al. conducted two longitudinal cross-lagged studies to explore how abusive supervision related to followers’ deviance and vice versa. Lian et al. found abusive supervision had a lagged effect on followers’ workplace deviance at six months but did not at 20 months. Interestingly, the researchers also found the followers’ workplace deviance related to abusive supervision at both 6 and 10 months. The researchers concluded both follower deviance and abusive supervision appeared to have long-term effects, and more research should be conducted to understand this reciprocal relationship.
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Vogel and Mitchell (2017) described similar findings regarding abusive supervision’s relationship with deviance. The researchers conducted three field studies to understand the relationship between abusive supervision and diminished self-esteem. Vogel and Mitchell surveyed participants at two different times and found self-esteem mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and followers’ self-preservation behaviors and workplace deviance. Furthermore, Vogel and Mitchell discovered a relationship between abusive supervision and followers’ self-esteem existed after a one-month time lag. The researchers stated this time-lagged relationship suggested abusive supervision could have long-term influences on followers. Vogel and Mitchell concluded more research is needed to understand the long-lasting effects of abusive leaders on their followers.

Before discussing the next study, it is important to discuss why the researcher included this study in the literature review. Ford et al. (2014), unlike the previous researchers, did not study the long-term influences of toxic leadership directly. Instead, the researchers examined the lagged occupational stressor-strain effects over time in individuals. The researcher deemed this study appropriate to include because of the vast literature supporting the relationship between toxic leadership and stress and strain. Ford et al. conducted a meta-analysis and found trend lines that showed lagged effects of occupational stressor-strain. Precisely, the researchers found the trendlines increased for three years after the stressor-strain before the trendlines decreased to an asymptotic pattern. Furthermore, the researchers discovered high-arousal responses to stress, such as anxiety and tension, were stronger than those of fatigue. Ford et al. concluded different types of occupational stressors could cause different types of responses in individuals,
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which could be experienced at different times, with some being long after the original stress occurrence. Ford et al., like many of the previously mentioned researchers, recommended additional research to understand long-term influences better.

Summary of Long-Term Influences

The number of existing studies exploring toxic leadership’s long-term influences on followers is far fewer than those that explored the influences at a given period of time. Nonetheless, the studies that centered around the long-term influences indicated the negative influence toxic leaders have on their followers does not end when the follower no longer reports to the toxic leader. Instead, the results indicated individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders continue to be influenced by their experience (Carleton et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2018). The researchers associated with these studies often called for additional research to understand long-term influences better. These researchers’ contentions align with those of Tepper et al. (2017) and Fischer et al. (2017), who both listed understanding the long-term influence of leadership on their future research agendas.

Literature Review Summary

Pelletier (2010) and Burns (2017) contend toxic leadership is complicated because many factors need to be considered. Followers perceive the behaviors of their leaders differently, and, as a result, the behaviors influence followers differently (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b). These different beliefs have resulted in various definitions of toxic leadership. While the definitions have varied, all definitions agree on one point: toxic leaders harm organizations and their followers (Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Various
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researchers have tested this relationship by studying how toxic leadership influences organizational and individual actions, behaviors, and beliefs.

The current literature offers information about these relationships to help us better understand the influence of toxic leadership. The literature is plentiful when it comes to exploring toxic leadership's influences on organizations and followers when followers report to the toxic leader. However, the literature is scarcer when it comes to exploring how toxic leaders continue to influence their followers after the followers no longer report to the leader (Oh & Farh, 2017). Existing literature does not include participant’s voices. As outlined in Chapter Three, this dissertation in practice research study attempted to extend the understanding of how the experience of reporting to a toxic leader continues to influence followers after they no longer report to a toxic leader. The study accomplished this by asking followers to describe how previous toxic leaders influence them.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter provided a review of the current toxic leadership research. This review illustrated the vast number of studies that have been conducted showing the negative influences of toxic leaders (Enalls-Fenner, 2017; Williams, 2018; Yaghi, 2019). Chapter Two also showed scarce research has been conducted to understand the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers (Tepper et al., 2017; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). Chapter Three outlines the research design, data collection and analysis strategies, and ethical considerations associated with this dissertation in practice research study.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study: “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?”

Method

Research Design Overview

To answer the research question in this qualitative study, the researcher used a descriptive study design. The goal of qualitative descriptive studies is to provide a comprehensive summary of events in everyday terms (Sandelowski, 2000; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Specifically, qualitative descriptive studies provide factual descriptions of a selected phenomenon to increase the understanding of the phenomenon across disciplines (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). To increase the desired understanding, researchers stay close to the data and present the data collected in a straightforward fashion instead of an interpretive or theoretical manner (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Kahlke, 2014). For these reasons, qualitative descriptive studies are suggested for studies when little is known about the particular phenomena (Kahlke, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000).
A qualitative descriptive study design aligned with this dissertation in practice research study in two critical ways. First, little is known about the phenomenon of previously reporting to a toxic leader or the long-term influences of toxic leaders (Carleton et al., 2016; Oh & Farh, 2017). As discussed in Chapter Two, vast literature exists supporting the negative influences of toxic leaders on their followers when the followers report to the toxic leader. However, scarce literature exists regarding how this experience influences the followers after they no longer report to their toxic leader. Second, the researcher sought to describe the influences discovered in this study as the participants describe them (Kim et al., 2017; Milne & Oberle, 2005). In qualitative descriptive studies, the researcher’s goals center around obtaining the facts from participants and presenting them without in-depth interpretation (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Sandelowski, 2009). The researcher did not aim to interpret results; instead, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon and present the results of the study in a practical way to augment our current understanding of toxic leaders and their influences.

Qualitative descriptive studies include purposeful sampling, data collection, data analysis, and data representation (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). The current dissertation in practice research study included each component described as accepted practices for qualitative descriptive studies. These components are described in detail in the following sections.

**Participants**

Researchers who utilize a qualitative descriptive design method use purposeful sampling to collect data from individuals who experienced the phenomenon in question (Milne & Oberle, 2005; Sandelowski, 2000). In the study, the researcher recruited
participants who have reported to a toxic leader in their past and do not now by using
detailed selection criteria. Because leadership transcends disciplines (Bass, 1990), the
researcher included participants from various sectors and organizations. Additionally, the
researcher purposefully decided not to select participants based on how or when their
relationship with their toxic leader ended. Instead, the researcher garnered this
information during the study as a data point for considering the long-term influences of
toxic leaders. The researcher intentionally piloted the interview protocol, before
conducting this study, with individuals whose relationships with toxic leaders ended
differently (e.g., terminated, leader terminated) and whose relationships ended within
different time periods (e.g., within a year from the interview, seven years from the
interview). The researcher was able to find commonalities between the participants. As a
result of this finding, the researcher deliberately selected participants whose relationships
with their toxic leaders ended differently and at different times. This finding regarding
the commonalities remained consistent for the actual research study, as demonstrated in
Chapter Four. The researcher collected the background information as data points in the
interview process and considered this information during the data analysis process. This
information is presented in the Participants section of Chapter Four.

Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants, the researcher used a combination of network sampling
and snowball sampling. Babbie (2017) stated network sampling was appropriate when the
size of the population is unknown, and when the researcher’s network likely contains
individuals who would meet the requirements of the study. Snowball sampling occurs
when participants of a study are requested to share the invitation with others (Noy, 2008).
The researcher utilized these types of sampling to recruit participants through postings on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook (see Appendix C for social network post). Snowball sampling was involved by asking individuals to share the invitation with others. All recruitment messages included a link to a digital form (see Appendix D) for individuals to complete indicating their interest in participating in the study.

**Participant Selection**

Within 48 hours of receiving an interest form, the researcher contacted potential participants via email. In this email, the researcher provided participants with two items: an informed consent form (see Appendix E) and a link to an online survey (see Appendix F) designed to ascertain if participants met the study’s criteria. To participate in the study, participants must have *previously* reported to a toxic leader during their career, meaning they reported to a toxic leader and no longer do. The survey was based on Schmidt’s (2008) Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS). The TLS questionnaire includes 30 items participants answered about their leaders using a 6-point Likert scale (ranging from Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=6) to rate their level of agreement. Participants responded to the 30 statements for their current leader and their presumed toxic leader (see Appendix F). Once the researcher received completed surveys, the researcher determined who met the study’s selection criteria by reviewing all surveys and including only those who met the following inclusion criteria:

1) Participants who scored their past leader 4.62 or higher on the average/composite score; and

2) Participants who scored their current leader 2.22 or less on the average/composite score.
The selection criteria for the current study were based on data cited by Schmidt (2008) when the TLS was created. Specifically, Schmidt reported an average/composite score of 3.42 for toxic leaders with a standard deviation of 1.2. The researcher combined the average score with the standard deviation to create the bounds for the selection criteria for the current study with 4.62 representing the bound for the toxic leader rating and 2.22 representing the bound for the current leader. Meaning an individual would need to rate their toxic leader at 4.62 or above and their current leader at 2.22 or below to be selected for the study. These selection criteria allowed the researcher to feel confident participants met the requirement of previously reporting to a toxic leader, meaning they reported to a toxic leader in their past and did not at the time of the study. The selection criteria for this study are essential as the only way to answer the study’s research question is by listening to how people who used to report to a toxic leader describe how this experience influences them after no longer reporting to the leader. The TLS is widely used in peer-reviewed research studies. For example, the TLS was used by Saqib and Arif (2017a, 2017b) to assess toxic leadership behaviors in relation to organizational learning and performance. By comparison, Webster et al. (2016) utilized the TLS to help identify coping strategies used by followers of toxic leaders.

After analyzing the survey information and determining the individuals who met the selection criteria, the researcher communicated with all individuals who submitted a survey. Specifically, the researcher contacted the individuals who did not meet the selection criteria to notify them they did not meet the requirements for participation in the study. The researcher also contacted the individuals who met the selection criteria to schedule a virtual interview via Zoom (Zoom.com). The scheduling message informed
participants web cameras would be enabled for the interview, and the interviews would be recorded.

**Number of Participants**

There is not a specific number of participants required for conducting qualitative research. Instead, qualitative researchers aim for saturation. Researchers who use a qualitative descriptive method reach saturation when no new categories emerge from interviews (Milne & Oberle, 2005). According to a review of 214 interview-based studies, this number is somewhere between six and 41 participants (Vasileiou et al., 2018). For the current study, the researcher initially planned to conduct at least 15-20 interviews and stop at a lesser number if no new categories emerged in additional interviews. To reach the targeted number of interviews, the researcher approximated 50 completed surveys would be needed to identify 15-20 participants. The researcher arrived at this approximation by using the composite TLS scores obtained from Schmidt (2008). Specifically, Schmidt’s average composite score was 3.42; the researcher’s selection criteria was higher; thus, the researcher estimated only 30-40% of individuals completing the survey would meet this threshold. After the recruitment and selection processes were fully executed, the researcher ended up with 17 participants. Detailed information about these participants can be found in the *Participants* section of Chapter Four.

**Data Collection**

**Data Collection Procedures**

Ensuring appropriate data collection procedures is critical in conducting research studies (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Before participant recruitment, the researcher gained approval from Creighton University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix I). To
ensure the integrity of the data collection, the researcher collected data methodically and sequentially. The researcher collected digital forms from interested parties and selection criteria survey responses. As data was collected, data were de-identified and tracked on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet stored on a password-protected personal cloud drive.

After completing the selection process, the researcher emailed participants who met the selection criteria to schedule a 45 to 60-minute virtual interview via Zoom (Zoom.com). Once participants scheduled an interview, they received an email confirmation, which included a link to the interview platform and instructions on accessing the meeting room. The researcher also sent a reminder email with the same information the day before the scheduled interview.

The researcher served as the sole interviewer and conducted all interviews via Zoom (Zoom.com). Zoom offers both video and recording functions; these functions are important as the researcher used video and recorded all interviews. The interviews were mildly to moderately structured and contained open-ended questions (see Appendix G). Participant voices need to be heard in qualitative descriptive studies; thus, open-ended questions were essential (Milne & Oberle, 2005).

Data were collected in two ways during the interviews. First, the researcher recorded all interviews for transcription purposes. Second, the researcher took field notes during the interview to document any visual cues observed during the interviews. Field notes were essential as field notes assisted in providing contextual information missing in transcripts (Milne & Oberle, 2005). For example, a participant could become emotional or agitated during an interview when telling a difficult story. Emotions witnessed in interviews provided contextual information that would not be captured in the interview
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transcripts. Therefore, field notes allowed the researcher to record details that could not be captured in transcripts, providing the contextual information for the words said.

After each interview, the researcher uploaded the recording of the interview to Rev.com, an online transcription service. Rev.com provides options for both machine and human transcription, with the more accurate transcription being the human transcription option. The researcher utilized the human transcription service to generate transcripts. After receiving the transcriptions generated by Rev.com, the researcher de-identified the transcripts, reviewed them for accuracy, and edited for spelling or grammar errors. After completing these steps, the researcher sent the transcripts to participants to review for accuracy. Allowing participants the ability to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcription assisted in ensuring the trustworthiness of the data (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Milne & Oberle, 2005).

Along with each participant’s transcript, the researcher also sent a demographic survey (see Appendix H) to complete. Gathering demographic information about participants via surveys is commonly used in qualitative studies (Julien, 2008). The information researchers gather in these surveys allows them to describe participants better. The researcher sought to offer clear descriptions of the participants; thus, the researcher employed a survey to collect demographic information.

In addition to the data collection methods listed above, the researcher engaged in reflexivity and bracketing. The researcher engaged in bracketing by writing memos and keeping a reflexive journal where they recorded thoughts and potential bias throughout the data collection and analysis process. Bracketing includes keeping written memos, a
reflexive journal, or participating in interviews with external parties to identify biases (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Data Collection Tools

The researcher collected data by using two primary tools. First, the researcher used a survey for participant selection (see Appendix F). As described in the Participant Selection section, this survey included the 30 questions on the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS). The TLS is widely accepted by toxic leadership researchers and has been used in numerous toxic leadership studies published in the past 10 years (e.g., Bakkal et al., 2019; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Webster et al., 2016). The TLS uses a 6-point Likert scale to measure participant perceptions of toxic leadership behaviors. As developed by Schmidt (2008), the Likert scale of the TLS ranges from Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=6 (see Appendix F). As opposed to the frequency-based scale used in Tepper’s Abusive Supervision Scale (Tepper, 2000), Schmidt (2008) chose an agree/disagree scale for the TLS based on the assumption leaders do not need to engage in toxic behaviors frequently to influence followers. For example, as noted by Schmidt, one outburst or violent behavior by a leader could be remembered by an individual and impact them for a long time; the behavior would not need to be frequently repeated to have an effect.

The reliability and validity of the TLS have also been tested and confirmed (Lita, 2018; Schmidt, 2008). When constructing the TLS, Schmidt (2008) tested for reliability by examining the reliability results for each dimension of the scale. Wanous et al. (1997) stated a single-item measure close to 0.70 should be considered reasonable for reliability. As reported by Schmidt, the Cronbach’s alpha for each dimension of the TLS scored at or above 0.88, thus allowing Schmidt to assert the TLS’ reliability. Schmidt also tested the
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Construct validity of the TLS. Construct validity is essential for new tests to ensure the new scale is measuring something different than other known tests (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). The TLS achieved both convergent and discriminant validity when compared with other leadership scales such as the Leader-Member Exchange and Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire scales (Schmidt, 2008). Lita (2018) evaluated the criterion validity of the TLS. Criterion validity refers to how scores on one measure predict another measure (Borneman, 2010). Lita tested the content validity in 243 participants in military units and found the TLS appropriately predicted the level of conflict in the studied units. Lita concluded the results showed support for the criterion validity of the TLS scale.

The second tool the researcher used to collect data was an interview protocol (see Appendix G). In qualitative descriptive studies, researchers collect data through minimally to moderately structured open-ended interviews (Sandelowski, 2000). Mildly structured interviews are interviews in which the researcher has an idea of the questions they will ask instead of a formal set of questions. Comparatively, in moderately structured or semi-structured interviews, researchers develop questions before the interviews and use roughly the same questions for each interview with the freedom to deviate to improve results (Kim et al., 2017). The goal of these interviews is to collect data directed toward discovering the main components, such as who, what, when, where, of events and experiences. Additionally, researchers seek to learn about the meaning the participants associated with the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000).

Interview protocols provide consistency between interviews, thus aiding in the reliability of data (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Interview protocols should include an opening statement, open-ended questions, prompts, and a closing statement (Jacob &
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Ferguson, 2012). Experts also recommend for interviewers to start with broad and easy questions and move to more specific, narrow, and difficult questions (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). The researcher’s interview protocol (see Appendix G) adhered to these recommendations. Specifically, the interview protocol started with background questions. These background questions were used to gain an understanding of when participants reported to a toxic leader and when and how their relationship with the toxic leader ended. The phenomenon questions built upon this information and asked participants to describe how reporting to a toxic leader influences them now. Additionally, the interview protocol (see Appendix G) included prompts the researcher used to obtain more details from the participants. Interview prompts are necessary in qualitative descriptive studies as they assist the researcher in garnering detailed and authentic responses from participants (Milne & Oberle, 2005).

To improve the interview protocol’s dependability, the researcher engaged experts to review the questions and piloted the questions in practice interviews. Incorporating feedback from more seasoned researchers and practicing interviews aids researchers identify necessary changes before the actual interviews are conducted (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Milne & Oberle, 2005). Additionally, the interview protocol and research design were approved by Creighton University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix I).

**Data Analysis**

The researcher began the data analysis process once participants confirmed the accuracy of their interview transcripts. The researcher used a thematic analysis process. In thematic analysis, the content is derived from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Additionally, thematic analysis is used by researchers to report
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the reality of an experience for participants. Therefore, thematic analysis can be used to amplify the voices of participants in research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Staller, 2010). Thus, thematic analysis aligned with qualitative research and this dissertation in practice research study. The researcher used a three-stage approach when performing thematic analysis: preparation, organization, and reporting. As outlined below, the researcher analyzed data in these three stages.

**Preparation**

In the preparation phase, researchers determine their unit of analysis, make sense of the data they collected, and set-up any systems they use to analyze their data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The current researcher used field notes and interview transcripts as units of observation and words or grouping of words as the unit of analysis. Units of analysis are the most basic elements in a study the researcher analyzes (Long, 2004). Since the researcher desired to learn about the studied phenomenon from the voices of the participants, the participants’ words were used as the basic unit for analysis for understanding the influence of previously reporting to a toxic leader.

To make sense of the data, the researcher read the field notes and interview transcripts multiple times. Reviewing interview transcripts multiple times is recommended so researchers can understand the big picture and the data before starting to code (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Lastly, the researcher uploaded all field notes and transcripts into MAXQDA (Maxqda.com), a computer software program to assist with ensuring all data was considered during the organization and reporting stages.
Organization

Once the preparation phase was complete, the researcher moved to organizing the data. In the organization phase, the researcher coded the data, created categories, and defined the created categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher began with open coding. In open coding, the researcher identifies concepts for categorization (Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher used In Vivo codes when coding the data. In Vivo codes are codes created from actual words or phrases used by participants (King, 2008). In Vivo codes are recommended for rarely studied phenomena because it forces the researcher to stay close to the data by using participants’ words (King, 2008; Saldaña, 2016). Examples of In Vivo codes offered by participants during interviews in the current study were “I’ve lost trust” or “it becomes part of your story.” While coding, the researcher also took notes and engaged in reflexivity to account for potential bias.

After completing the initial coding, the researcher transitioned to the second stage in the coding process: axial coding. In axial coding, researchers look for overlap and redundancy in the initial codes and group similar codes together (Saldaña, 2016; Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher condensed and grouped codes using a higher-order approach. Codes were grouped based on similarities and differences and in higher-order using subcodes. In unison with the coding process, the researcher created a codebook. Codebooks contain the names and descriptions of codes and subcodes (Roberts et al., 2019). Aligning with the In Vivo approach, the researcher recorded participant quotes associated with the codes and subcodes in the codebook.
Once axial coding was completed, the researcher transitioned to the third stage of coding: selective coding. Selective coding builds upon the work completed in axial coding and extends the process by having the researcher select categories based on the codes established (Williams & Moser, 2019). Categories are broader concepts comprised of the assigned codes. Categories or themes provide a broader way to describe a phenomenon, thus allowing knowledge to be increased and generated (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Williams & Moser, 2019). Vaismoradi et al. (2013) recommended the use of the term *categories* in qualitative descriptive studies as it infers a descriptive level of analysis as compared to *themes* which is perceived as more interpretative. Thus, the researcher used the term *categories*. In thematic analysis, researchers should define the themes, or categories, created to create a clear picture of each category (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Heeding this recommendation, the researcher defined each category identified. It is also important to note the researcher continued to update the codebook and engaged in reflexivity and bracketing while creating categories.

Before finalizing the categories, the researcher initiated an external audit of the work. Specifically, the researcher asked an experienced qualitative researcher to review the codes and categories. The researcher selected this individual based on the individual’s previous work with qualitative studies, which was determined by reviewing their curriculum vitae (CV) and publications. The external reviewer reviewed the data and data analysis and provided feedback regarding the appropriateness of the categories. The feedback provided was minimal and centered around specific word choices. The researcher incorporated these suggestions before finalizing the categories. The external reviewer's work was critical as the review and subsequent confirmation of categories
aided in the validity of the data. A review by an external party aids in adding to the trustworthiness of the data (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Milne & Oberle, 2005).

**Reporting**

After validating code and category appropriateness, the researcher produced two items to support the thematic analysis process. First, the researcher created an outline (see Appendix J) from the codebook detailing categories, subcategories, and quotes from participants. Second, a table was created to present categories in a meaningful way. The table, as seen in the *Results* section of Chapter Four, included categories, subcategories, and quotes from participants. Using quotes from participants is recommended to ensure participants' voices are heard and to provide a realistic description (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical research standards and best practices were considered at each step during the dissertation in practice research. Specifically, participants received information about the study and any potential risks as soon as they expressed interest in participating. This informed consent form (see Appendix E) included details about the commitment to minimize the risk of harm and commitment to confidentiality of participants’ names and any other organizational or personal names provided during the study. Participants were also informed they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality were especially crucial to the current study. For anonymity to exist in research, the participant identities would not even be known to the researcher (Saunders et al., 2015). The researcher was not able to provide anonymity to participants, as the researcher often knew the participants’ identities.
However, the researcher ensured privacy and confidentiality by de-identifying each participant’s responses. Precisely, the researcher removed participant names, organization names, names of other individuals, and any other identifiable information participants provided during data collection. This de-identified information was saved on a password-protected personal cloud drive to which only the researcher has access. Furthermore, the researcher refers to participants in a non-specific nature such as Participant 1798 when writing about participants. These steps protected participant privacy and ensured confidentiality.

Another ethical consideration in the current study was data reliability and validity. One way researchers can positively affect the reliability of the data collected from interviews is by following an interview protocol (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). As discussed in the Data Collection Tools section of Chapter Three, the researcher piloted the interview protocol and sought input from an expert panel. The pilot interviews and expert feedback aided the researcher in identifying necessary changes before the actual interviews were conducted (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). The researcher conducted four practice interviews and engaged two other individuals through an expert panel review. To positively influence validity, the researcher used three approaches. First, the researcher used member-checking by asking participants to review interview transcripts. Second, the researcher used peer-review by having an external reviewer audit data categories. Third, the researcher engaged in reflexivity and utilized their dissertation committee for feedback during the study to account for potential bias.

Another ethical consideration was site authorization or permission (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Since the current study did not occur at any particular site, and all
research was conducted outside of any organizational structures, no specific authorization was required. To ensure alignment, the researcher scheduled interviews outside of business hours, used personal email addresses, and used personal technology devices and software. Lastly, the researcher had no conflict of interest pertaining to this study. Conflicts of interest are situations in which professional judgment could be influenced by secondary interests such as career advancement or financial gains (Romain, 2015). As a result, a researcher could present findings in a biased or incomplete manner.

**Summary**

Toxic leadership is a destructive type of leadership (Burns, 2017; Lipman-Blumen, 2005a; Pelletier, 2010). Prior research has suggested that toxic leadership harms organizations and followers (Weberg & Fuller, 2019). Research has also indicated that toxic leadership is common (Brooks, 2017; Dobbs & Do, 2019; Society of Human Resource Management, 2019). Thus, there was a need in the current study to understand this form of leadership to bring awareness to how organizations and followers are influenced. Prior research offered scarce information about how toxic leaders continue to influence their followers after they no longer report to the leader. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to build on this research and extend our understanding by exploring the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers. To accomplish this goal, a qualitative descriptive study was used to describe the long-term influences of toxic leaders in a straightforward, descriptive manner.
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Toxic leaders are leaders who inflict harm on organizations and followers (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a; Weberg & Fuller, 2019). As discussed in Chapter Two, the current literature has illustrated the numerous negative influences toxic leaders have on organizations and individuals when followers report to a toxic leader. Additionally, a review of the current literature exposed a gap in our understanding of toxic leadership influences, namely, the long-term influence of toxic leaders on followers who no longer report to them. This dissertation in practice research study was conducted to help address this identified gap. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to describe how followers continue to be influenced by a former toxic leader after the followers no longer report to the toxic leader. This study built upon the current research and sought to answer the question: “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?”

This chapter presents the results and findings of this study. Precisely, this chapter includes study participant information, an overview of the data analysis process, and the categories and subcategories identified as a result of the analysis process. Finally, the chapter closes with a presentation of the study’s findings and a discussion about the strengths and limitations of this dissertation in practice research study.

Results

Participants

As previously discussed in Chapter Three, the researcher recruited participants for the current study by using network sampling and snowball sampling. To recruit participants, the researcher posted a recruitment message on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. Members in the researcher’s network subsequently shared this message. It is
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

important to note the researcher has worked in higher education for over twenty years; thus, the researcher’s network is highly comprised of individuals working in education-related fields. Within 14 days of the posting, 90 individuals submitted interest forms indicating their desire to participate in the study. Since this number was higher than what the researcher needed for 15-20 interviews, the researcher stopped recruiting participants 14 days after the initial post.

Two of the 90 interested participants did not provide valid contact information; this resulted in the researcher emailing 88 individuals the informed consent form and the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS). Of these 88 individuals, 60 individuals (68.18%) completed the TLS; 27 of these individuals (45.00%) met the selection criteria, meaning these individuals scored their former toxic leader at or above 4.62 and their current leader at or below 2.22. This percentage was higher than what the researcher estimated, which was 30% to 40%. Of the 33 individuals who did not qualify, 10 individuals (30.30%) did not qualify because they rated their toxic leader lower than 4.62, 19 individuals (57.58%) rated their current leader above 2.22, and four individuals (12.12%) scored both their current leader and toxic leader outside of the selection bounds.

The researcher attempted to schedule interviews with the 27 individuals who met the selection criteria. Of these 27 individuals, 21 individuals (78%) scheduled an interview. Eighteen of the individuals (86%) attended the interview. During these interviews, the researcher discovered one individual (5.56%) did not meet the selection criteria. Specifically, one individual interviewed was not currently working; thus, disqualifying them from this study. The researcher completed the interview but did not include data from the interview in the analysis. As a result, the researcher ended with 17
participants, which aligned with the researcher’s original goal of completing 15-20
interviews. The demographic information for the participants is provided in Table 1
below.

**Table 1**

*Participants’ Demographic and Professional Characteristics (n=17)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to Not Answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate Degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public or Non-Profit Org</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-12 Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Unknown is the result of three participants not completing the demographic survey.

In addition to capturing demographic information, the researcher collected data
about how participant relationships with their toxic leaders ended, and when the
relationship ended. The vast majority of the participants, 15 of 17 individuals, elected to
leave their position with their toxic leader by either transferring positions or resigning
(see Table 2). The time since the participants reported to their toxic leader varied greatly.
Three had been removed for less than a year, while two had been removed for more than ten years. The specific information regarding these data points is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*How and When the Relationship with Toxic Leader Ended*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toxic Leader Removal Information</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the “relationship” with the toxic leader ended</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferred to new position (same org)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resigned</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>76.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxic leader removed from position</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time removed from toxic leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1- 3 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis Process**

Before discussing the categories identified in the study, it is crucial to summarize the process the researcher used to determine the categories. As discussed in the *Data Analysis* section of Chapter Three, the researcher engaged in a three-step coding process. Specifically, the researcher started with open coding, using In Vivo codes, moved to axial coding, and closed with selective coding to create categories and subcategories. Phased coding processes allow qualitative researchers to derive themes directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To facilitate the phased coding process, the researcher used MAXQDA (maxqda.com).

In the first stage of coding, the researcher coded 522 segments. Of these 522 segments, 72 were associated with background information, 99 with emotions, 18 were for the length of time spent participants spent discussing toxic leader information, and 333 were In Vivo codes, which were used to create categories. The researcher then
moved to axial coding. In axial coding, researchers condense codes, using a higher-order approach (Saldaña, 2016; Williams & Moser, 2019). After completing axial coding, the researcher consolidated the 333 In Vivo codes to 12 category codes and 15 subcategory codes. Selective coding was then employed to determine categories. Categories are broader concepts comprised of the assigned codes that provide a more comprehensive way to describe a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vais moradi et al., 2013). Through selective coding, the researcher identified six themes and 10 subthemes, which are discussed in the following section. Figure 1 illustrates the analysis process used by the researcher.

**Figure 1**

*Three-Phase Coding Process for Category Creation*

![Three-Phase Coding Process for Category Creation](image)

**Presentation of Categories**

After completing the data analysis process discussed briefly in the previous section and in detail in Chapter Three, the researcher identified six categories and 10 subcategories (Figure 2) to answer the research question: “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?” The major categories identified were

- **Category One: Changing Followers as People**
- **Category Two: Influencing Current Work Lives**
- **Category Three: Leadership**
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

Category Four: Self-Confidence

Category Five: Ability to Trust

Category Six: Appreciation for Current Work Situation

To organize salient and discrete points under six categories, 10 subcategories were created. To describe how followers were changed as people, Category One, three subcategories were created: (a) health implications that are forever part of the story, (b) perceived as trauma/traumatic experience, and (c) stunted career growth. Category Two was broken into two subcategories to describe better the significant ways in which current work lives were influenced: (a) influence emotions and thoughts at work and (b) influence behaviors and actions at work. Two distinct categories emerged from the leadership category, (a) followers’ leadership practice, and (b) general thoughts about leadership; thus, the researcher created two subcategories for Category Three. Last, the researcher identified three specific areas where followers’ self-confidence, Category Four, was influenced, so three subcategories were created: (a) lack of confidence in judgment, (b) lack of confidence in abilities, and (c) lack of confidence in feelings. Categories Five and Six had no subcategories. Figure 2 depicts the structure of the categories identified.
One goal of qualitative descriptive studies is to amplify participant voices by presenting findings in a straight-forward manner (Milne & Oberle, 2005). To meet this goal and the researcher’s goal of amplifying the voices of followers, the researcher created categories informed by the participants’ words. Table 3 presents the categories, subcategories, and a sample quote from participants to demonstrate the alignment between participant quotes and category creation.

**Table 3**

*Previous Toxic Leader Influences: Categories, Subcategories, and Participant Quotes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and subcategory</th>
<th>Participant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Changing followers as people. Not seen as reporting to a bad boss in the past. Instead, perceived as something that changed them as a person.</td>
<td>“I would say that, again, it changes you as a person. It's a very big statement to say it changes[you] as a person, but really it does. It changes you as a person because, in some cases, it can make you more cynical. In some cases, it can make you wonder...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. **Health implications that are forever part of the story.** Suffered health and mental ailments that cannot be erased in their history.  

“There are health implications that are both psychological and physical that occur because of working in an environment with a toxic leader... Can those things be remedied after you leave, after you're no longer living and working in that arena? Absolutely, however, it becomes part of your story, right? It's that experience and the implications of those. Whether that's going on antidepressants, taking anxiety medication, having to... physical symptoms that come through stress in your body.” (Participant 1366)

2. **Current work lives.** Past experience of a toxic leader continues to influence current work lives and routines.  

“So, I've told my new boss probably three times, to quote myself, "We're going to have to de-program me," because things in my new job are so much just easier and less complicated.” (Participant 1023)
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

3 Leadership. Past toxic leaders influence followers' leadership practice and thoughts about leadership.

“It did cause me to reflect a lot on how I was supervising [my team members]. I feel like I made some really positive changes in there because I was in a situation where she was telling me how to supervise them when I would have a difficult situation. And to begin with, I was trying to follow what she said and then realizing no, that's not the type of leader that I want to be, so I made some changes there. And I feel like if I have employees or I'm in a situation where I'm a supervisor or leader, I will be very aware, much more aware than I ever was of healthy leadership and doing a lot of reading and studying about how to do it.” (Participant 8008)

3.a Their leadership practice. Past toxic leaders influence how followers act as leaders.

“I’ll tell you, one of the driving motivations behind my leadership style is not being like that person. For me, I do try to put people first. You know the saying, if you take care of your people, they take care of you…There are definitely moments in time where, when confronted with something, I know what flashes through my head is this background of what I had experienced. I don't want anyone to go like that. I make sure that I'm doing it differently.” (Participant 1798)

3.b General thoughts about leadership. Learned general leadership lessons, such as identifying effective leadership, from their experience.

“It’s helped me to compare and contrast what does [sic] good leadership looks like.” (Participant 3003)

4 Self-confidence. Previous followers of toxic leaders expressed feeling less confident in their judgment, abilities, and feelings.

“My confidence over the last five years has just been going down and down and down, even though everyone that I work with only has really positive, nice things to say.” (Participant 1023)

4.a Lack of confidence in judgment. Concerned about their ability to judge situations and take appropriate actions.

“There's just so much questioning of myself around that as well, and my judge of character, and my judge of leadership, and good leadership and what that is. So I think it's going to take a long time to get over that part of it.” (Participant 8008)
4.b Lack of confidence in abilities. Concerned about their ability to perform current position or worthiness of position.

“Yeah, and time to learn to own it, and be like, "Yeah, I earned this. I have earned this." But I feel like some of the leftover of that is like I would hear my former toxic leaders be like something along the lines of like I didn't deserve it or that kind of thing.” (Participant 3003)

4.c Lack of confidence in their feelings. Wondering if their feelings about the toxic leader were “normal.”

“I'd love to see and hear some of the feedback. Of course, without names and all that, but what you're hearing from other people, like is similar to how I've felt? Am I not crazy because they felt the same way, or I don't know it's just...and what type of leaders are out there creating this toxic feeling?” (Participant 1244)

5 Ability to trust. Hesitancy to trust others.

“Even though I love working at [current organization], and trust, there's still a side of me that has this lack of trust...When's the other shoe going to drop? When am I going to be...When is somebody not going to make good on a promise that's been made to me?” (Participant 1509)

6 Appreciation for current work situation. Gratitude for “little” things that could be seen as expected from a work environment.

“I guess it just made me so much more appreciative when you have a good boss. It's not lost on me that not everyone is afforded that luxury, to have a boss who cares about your well-being.” (Participant 2002)

Each of these categories and subcategories is discussed in the following sections.

Specifically, each category is defined, and sample quotes from participants are provided to illustrate the spirit of each category and subcategory. A more detailed list of quotes used to inform the category creation is presented in Appendix J. A synthesis of the lessons learned from these categories is synthesized in the Findings section of this chapter.

**Category One: Changing Followers as People**

A category that was evident across experiences described by all 17 participants, and one that surprised the researcher, was the participants believed the experience of
reporting to a toxic leader changed them as people. Specifically, the participants described the experience as something that has shaped them, their story, their beliefs, and their actions. In other words, the participants did not view their toxic leader as a “bad boss they had at one point.” Instead, the participants described the toxic leader as someone who influenced who they are today in all aspects of their lives, not just who they are at work. The depth of this finding, while it surprised the researcher, aligns with the servant leadership philosophy. Specifically, Greenleaf (1990) contends the servant leader influences individuals to grow as humans and that this growth should extend after the follower no longer reports to the servant leader. This study’s participants expressed their experience lingered with them after they stopped reporting to a toxic leader. They expressed this in many ways, as described in the subcategories; however, an overall general theme emerged that they were influenced as people. Participant 1010 shared:

I would say that, again, it changes you as a person. It's a very big statement to say it changes [you] as a person, but really it does. It changes you as a person because, in some cases, it can make you more cynical. In some cases, it can make you wonder more. In other cases, it can change the way you lead going into the next position. I would just say it really changes you as a person.

Another participant, Participant 6007, summarized similar sentiments by stating, “But know that when you're a toxic leader, you're damaging someone as a person, not just their future employment, but you can be damaging them as a person.” Again, the sentiment expressed was the toxic leader was not “just” damaging individuals’ work performance in their future jobs; instead, they were damaging them as people; implying
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the influence extends beyond the work lives for followers. A similar belief was expressed by Participant 1798:

But did it have a lasting effect on me? Yes. Does it still continue to influence me? Yes. Those things don't go away. You have your pain, and you can either let your pain define you, or you can use your pain and recognize that it's part of you and work with it. While I may not experience the physical and mental pains and hardships of what I had, it's still there; it's part of me. It's now something that I can draw on and use…If you focus on it, then it continues to stick with you, and it can permanently damage you, whether that's your career or mentally or emotionally. A toxic leader doesn't just affect an individual's work. It affects the individual, the whole person. Their outlook on who they are and on what they do, and on how they do it. It doesn't end when the workday does. You carry it with you. (Participant 1798)

Other participants (see Appendix J) stated similar thoughts about being changed as a person. Additionally, within this category, three subcategories emerged. These subcategories, as described below, were three of the specific ways participants described how the experience of reporting to a toxic leader changed them as people.

**Subcategory A: Health Implications that are Forever Part of the Story.** One of the ways eight participants described how their toxic leaders changed them was through health and mental ailments they suffered as a result of the toxic leader that cannot be erased from the participants’ lives. As one participant, Participant 1366, stated:

There are health implications that are both psychological and physical that occur because of working in an environment with a toxic leader. And it's... Can those
things be remedied after you leave, after you're no longer living and working in
that arena? Absolutely, however, it becomes part of your story, right? It’s that
experience and the implications of those. Whether that's going on antidepressants,
taking anxiety medication, having to... physical symptoms that come through
stress in your body.

Another health-related story, which cannot be erased, was recounted by
Participant 1010. This participant discussed being checked into a medical facility because
of their physical and emotional state. The experience of being in a medical facility is not
one that disappears because a leader changes. In other words, it remains a part of the
individual’s story after they no longer report to the toxic leader. Participant 1010 shared:

My doctor, she's like, "Do I need to be concerned about you?" or anything like
that. I said, "I just want to sleep. I haven't slept in three weeks. I just want to close
my eyes and sleep for a week." The next thing I know, they called the ambulance
and sent me to the hospital. The hospital tried to...They said you can either choose
to Baker Act [sic] or we're going to Baker Act [sic] you. I'm like, "I'm not going
to kill myself or anything like that. I want to sleep, and I haven't slept." The next
thing I know, I'm in a psych ward for a week.

Another participant described needing medical help to handle the toxic leader and
then afterward to “divorce” themselves from the toxic leader's actions. Participant 1798
disclosed:

From there, it led to me wanting to go back and talk to a doctor, talk to a
psychologist, psychiatrist, medication, all that stuff. If you have to be medicated
to perform your job, that's a sign. Some of us have to be medicated for long-term
health needs, but if you need something specifically to help you cope with your job, that should be a big sign. That's where I was. They took a couple of months to work through with health professionals how to divorce me from this person's actions.

Overall, these participants expressed having an overall decline in health when reporting to a toxic leader. Participant 1109 communicated, “...physical decline in health, I was just sick all the time, and I kept writing it off as something else. So, there's a true physical toll to that level of stress.” In the interviews, participants recounted the physical and mental ailments they experienced when working for a toxic leader and stressed the importance of these ailments. Thus, the researcher summarized these ailments, or the time someone spent battling ailments, cannot be erased. Instead, as Participant 1366 stated, they become part of an individual’s story.

**Subcategory B: Perceived as Trauma/Traumatic Experience.** Another part of an individual’s life that cannot be erased are traumatic experiences. The study’s participants often described the experience of reporting to a toxic leader as a traumatic one. Specifically, 14 participants’ used words or displayed emotions aligned with the subcategory of trauma, with five of the participants using “trauma” in their answers. Additionally, the researcher observed and documented in the field notes; 11 of the 17 participants became emotional in their interviews. More precisely, seven participants cried, and another four appeared to be fighting tears or told the researcher they were fighting tears during the interview. These emotional reactions align with the theme of trauma.
Before discussing trauma, it is essential to consider what trauma is. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2014), trauma is a single event, numerous events, or a sustained experience resulting in stress and stress-related disorders. All types of trauma can create responses from the individuals who experienced the trauma. Additionally, trauma can continue to influence individuals much after the experience ended.

Many participants contended that the toxic leader created trauma in their lives, and this trauma still influences them today. Specifically, there were often specific events or repeated actions participants recalled that caused an emotional reaction. Participant 4004 shared how their toxic leader’s words still influence them today. “She said some awful, just awful things, terrible things that still essentially, in many ways, haunt me to this day.” Another participant, Participant 5005, revealed how the entire experience and one particular event still influences them today:

I would call it trauma, I mean, that was a traumatic experience for me. I will never forget it. I mean, I almost started to get...almost cry, when I first started to talk to you about it...even though this happened a long time ago. Like it was a horrible, horrible experience to go through. And I, to this day, again, still can see him coming over the table at me. I will never forget that experience. And it was one of the worst days ever of my career.

Participant 8008 shared how specific items cause reactions in them now, “That anxiety is still there with me after a year. It's hard to see her name or to see her.” Participant 8008 was not the only participant who expressed an emotional reaction by just seeing or hearing their toxic leader’s name. Participant 5005 stated, “It’s a trigger, I just
have to hear the word [toxic leader’s name], and….it makes me just think about [toxic leader]. And so I will never forget it, it will always be in my mind.” Similarly, Participant 1010 disclosed they also had emotional triggers because of their toxic leader:

I think there are emotional triggers as a key piece. I can't hear the word [toxic leader’s name] without cringing. Whenever I hear about [prior university], I would say I was a [school mascot] fan, and now whenever I think of [prior university], I associate [prior university] with [toxic leader] even though they had nothing to do with each other, and nobody over there knew what was going on. So those emotional triggers are still pretty big, and not only did they impact me from a work perspective, but my family had to see me go through some very horrible times. To understand what he did to me at work and his behavior at work and how it changed me as a person and how my family saw me, it really was a very humbling experience because my family was used to me being the strong person, and they all had to be strong for me.

The participants, as seen in this section, expressed how even small events in their lives can remind them of their toxic leader and cause strong emotions, feelings, and invoke painful memories. The researcher heard the participants express numerous times these feelings do not disappear entirely. Participant 1798 summed up this category perfectly:

There's a long-lasting, emotional part of this I don't think anybody can completely eliminate. You can let it not define you, but it's still there. A toxic leader builds a traumatic experience in a person's life. Like all trauma, it never completely goes away; it's still there.
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The participants shared they considered reporting to a toxic leader as a traumatic experience. As a result, this traumatic experience has shaped them, who they are, and their current lives. Like all trauma, the experience continues to linger with them after no longer reporting to their toxic leader.

**Subcategory C: Stunted Career Growth.** The third category identified how a toxic leader changed individuals as people related to their career trajectory and professional growth of followers. The first two subcategories addressed how the toxic leader changed followers by adding medical, mental, and traumatic experiences to their stories. The last category addresses the work-related influence toxic leaders had on followers that changed them as people.

Within this subcategory, two specific trains of thought were identified. First, followers believe the toxic leader influenced them as people because they did not grow professionally during the time they reported to a toxic leader. Participant 1366 summarized this thinking:

> It was deeply sad for me because I feel like my whole career has been stunted. And you can't get that back. You can't change those 10 years of not being able to do this thing, this initiative or that initiative, and that's deeply sad on a multitude of levels.

Second, participants discussed how the toxic leader influenced the type of positions they applied for after reporting to the toxic leader. Participant 6007 summed up this idea:

> Because of all of the very personal and personality attacks, I felt a lot like something was wrong with me as a person and that I'm a deeply flawed human,
being beyond concepts of original sin, like the whole thing, but that I am really, really flawed, and that I don't deserve to work to have professional advancement, to have good positions, to have good pay. It was shaping the kinds of positions that I went after.

To summarize this subcategory, participants discussed ways their growth was stunted when reporting to the toxic leader. As a result, they were not able to progress professionally during that time. Additionally, participants described applying for and accepting positions they considered “a step back in a career” (Participant, 1798) after leaving their toxic leader. Either one of these two paths resulted in the followers of toxic leaders not progressing in their careers for some time, and this time cannot be recouped.

Category Two: Current Work Lives

The second category identified in the data analysis process is “Current Work Lives.” Specifically, the researcher identified how prior toxic leaders influence current work lives and routines by influencing past follower emotions and thoughts at work. Additionally, previous toxic leaders influence follower behaviors and actions at work. Participant 1023 talked to both of these influences when discussing a conversation with her current leader. “So, I've told my new boss probably three times, to quote myself, "We're going to have to de-program me," because things in my new job are so much just easier and less complicated.” Participant 1366 discussed her own restructuring of behaviors and actions “It's the daily practice of work. It's having to restructure how I do that. Not, the tasks are all still the same, but the engagement with the colleagues and the boss, I think.”
The “de-programming” and “restructuring” fell in two areas, which are the subcategories of the category. First, participants described their previous toxic leader presently influences their emotions and thoughts at work. Second, the participants described how their previous toxic leaders still influence their behaviors and actions. These subcategories are described in the following sections.

**Subcategory A: Influence Emotions and Thoughts at Work.** Participants discussed having their emotions and thoughts in their current work environment influenced by their previous toxic leader. Participant 6006 discussed having to regulate their thoughts regularly because they perceive things that are not really there at work. Participant 6006 explained this thinking:

> Whenever something comes up, I have to check what am I bringing to this that isn't really here…it is really that checking like, "Okay, how much of that is coming from trauma that you've experienced rather than what the actual situation is?"

In other words, Participant 6006 discussed reading more into events or actions than what was really there. Participant 9009 provided a specific example of this by discussing how they believe they worry about being fired when their current and supportive leader asks to see them in the current leader’s office:

> Like if he wants to tell me something that maybe I shouldn't know or that isn't a hundred percent yet, but he wants to give me a heads up, something like that. He used to just send me a text that said, "can you come see me?" Or "Make an appointment, have…his secretary make us an appointment so we can talk." Or those types of things. And after the fourth time, and every time, even though it
wasn't a big deal, like when we did finally talk, he's like, "Oh hey, we might be getting some new computers, and do you want one?" Like those types of things. It wasn't even...That's not what I thought this was. Okay, because I thought this whole weekend that I was being fired, so thanks. And so I finally was just like, "I can't [deal] with this anymore. It has to be really important when you say, "Can you come see me in my office."

These examples provided by participants illustrate how previous toxic leaders influence emotions and thoughts at work. As a result, these stress levels or anxiety of these individuals can continue to be influenced in their current work environment.

Participant 1614 described how others perceive them in their current work environment:

So there's been instances like that that have happened to me. I think I wrote about it in my little survey, but the super boss, as my [partner] calls him, we were on a call the other day, not the other day, but it was a month ago, whatever. He said something like, “how's my most nervous co-worker?” And I was like, “what?” He's like, “I probably shouldn't have said that. I'm really sorry. But you kind of are, you're like a little anxiety ball sometimes.” And I'm like, “I know.” Honestly, I think it's from my last job.

Based on the participant's feedback and examples, the researcher identified one of the ways previous toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them is by influencing their current emotions and thoughts at work. It is important to note there is overlap with Category Four and Category Five, as both self-confidence and trust influence current work emotions. Thus, there could be even more influences on emotions and feelings than listed in this subcategory.
**Subcategory B: Influence Behaviors and Actions at Work.** Similar to the previous category, previous toxic leaders can continue to influence followers by influencing their behaviors and actions in their current nontoxic work environments. Participant 4004 summarized their beliefs on why this occurs “A toxic leader brings out people's insecurities at an expert level, hence the communication for me, the over-communicating.” Specifically, Participant 4004 described how they have a continued desire to share what they are doing at work by documenting everything on their calendar, even though their current leader trusts them and does not need this information. They shared, “It's something that I still do. I put everything religiously on my calendar, down to what I'm working on that particular hour, and it's all because of her. It's all because of her [previous toxic leader].”

Other participants acknowledged they also still act and behave in manners consistent with their previous work environment, which are not aligned with their current environment or leader’s expectations. Participant 6006 discussed needing to tell their current leader about events they were attending outside of work:

I just went into [current leader’s] office, and I was like, "Just so you know, I'm going to this thing, and [local mayor’s] wife will be there," because she's a vendor for my [partner's] firm, and [current leader] is like, "I don't care," and I'm like, "Okay, that stuff used to get me in trouble."

Similarly, Participant 9009 described needing their current leader knowing what they are doing even though the results speak for their actions:

We have the third-highest online success rates in the state. We have very, very high standards for teaching, but I also want...I feel like I need him to know all the things
that I'm doing all the time and that so he can see that I'm actually doing things. Does that make sense?

The participants' stories indicated previous toxic leaders continue to influence the current work lives of followers who no longer report to them by influencing their current behaviors and actions at work. Interestingly, this study’s participants identified these behaviors and actions and understood they were not aligned with their current leader’s needs and expectations. However, despite knowing this, participants still acted in the way aligned with their previous toxic leader.

**Category Three: Leadership**

The previous two categories discussed some of the more negative ways previous toxic leaders continue to influence followers who no longer report to them. Category Three is more positive. Fourteen participants discussed how their previous toxic leader influenced their thoughts on leadership. Specifically, toxic leaders influenced the participants’ leadership in two primary ways. First, participants stated their previous toxic leader had positively influenced their leadership practice. Second, participants discussed how their previous toxic leader taught them, in general, about leadership. Both influences resulted in a deeper understanding of leadership. Participant 8008 discussed both aspects by indicating how they change their leadership style and, because of the experience, have been studying leadership more:

It did cause me to reflect a lot on how I was supervising [my team members]. I feel like I made some really positive changes in there because I was in a situation where she was telling me how to supervise them when I would have a difficult situation. And to begin with, I was trying to follow what she said and then
realizing no, that's not the type of leader that I want to be, so I made some changes there. And I feel like if I have employees or I'm in a situation where I'm a supervisor or leader, I will be very aware, much more aware than I ever was of healthy leadership and doing a lot of reading and studying about how to do it.

**Subcategory A: Their Leadership Practice.** The Society of Human Resource Management (2019) shared 76% of individuals in their annual survey looked to their leader for mentorship, guidance, and behavior examples. In the current study, participants also looked to their toxic leader for these essential items. However, in this instance, the previous toxic leaders’ behaviors provided an example of “what not to do” as a leader. Participant 3003 summarized this succinctly by saying, “Now I am one of the leaders, so it's kind of my goal, is to not be the toxic leader from what I've learned. I've learned what not to do.” Participant 1798 expanded a bit more on how their toxic leader drives their leadership practice:

I'll tell you, one of the driving motivations behind my leadership style is not being like that person. For me, I do try to put people first. You know the saying, if you take care of your people, they take care of you…There are definitely moments in time where, when confronted with something, I know what flashes through my head is this background of what I had experienced. I don't want anyone to go like that. I make sure that I'm doing it differently.

Participant 4004 shared a specific scenario about how their previous toxic leader shapes the kind of leader they want to be. Or more accurately, Participant 4004 shared the kind of leader they do not want to be: the type that “won’t cut.” The participant recounted a specific memory to illustrate what they meant:
She was like, "Well, because I saw that you were cutting in those papers for the student worker. I just wanted to know what that was about." I was like, "Well, nothing. I was just helping her." And she was like, "Okay. Well, you see, leaders don't cut. You needed to be spending any free time that you have on looking up grants or doing programmatic things or whatever." I was just like, "What?" And I think that was one of the first moments that I truly realized that she was self-absorbed, but I was like, "What?" And I'll never forget that. Leaders don't cut. I would never feel so high above doing a menial task. I have to be, as a leader, I have to be boots on the ground with my team too. Of course, we have to do all the upper level, high-level stuff, absolutely. But you also can't be afraid of doing the dirty work because then your team doesn't respect you if you're never helping them, and that's how, in my opinion, that's how ill feelings toward supervisors begin. It's like, "Oh, she's always taking all the credit for all the work that I do, and she never helps us." That's not who I wanted to be, and that is the prime example that I can give of the leader that I don't want to be. Leaders don't cut.

In addition to teaching followers about the type of leader they do not want to be, participants expressed more intentionality to the leadership practice. Participant 1109 summarized this by discussing how they engage in self-auditing to ensure they align with their leadership practice, “there's a lot more drive and sort of auditing, like personal auditing that I do to make sure that I align with my own personal journey.” As seen in this subcategory, previous toxic leaders positively influenced their past followers' leadership practices. In other words, the followers expressed a robust and intentional desire to be a different type of leader than the toxic leader the participants experienced.
Subcategory B: General Thoughts about Leadership. In addition to influencing followers' personal leadership practice, previous toxic leaders shaped followers’ general thoughts and understanding of leadership. Specifically, participants discussed how they observed different types of leadership and how those insights extended their understanding of leadership. One participant, Participant 3003, discussed learning what meaning a leader does not mean:

So I think that was the biggest takeaway that I got, was being a leader doesn't mean being the loudest, and being upfront, and being the most vocal. And there are subliminal and smaller things that you do, that get people underneath you to trust you, that you know what you're doing. You don't have to be the biggest and the loudest.

Likewise, Participant 1887 shared the experience with their previous toxic leader and current experience with their non-toxic leader informed their thoughts about “good leadership.” Participant 1887 proclaimed:

It's helped me to compare and contrast what does [sic] good leadership looks like. If I want to be a leader, I have a model to emulate if I want to. I have several models to emulate, but it also gives me things I want to practice in what I do, no matter who, whether it's people who report to me or colleagues who are on my level.

In other words, participants learned about leadership by observing toxic leaders. As a result, they were able to compare and contrast positive and toxic leadership actions and behaviors. This understanding furthered the participants’ understanding of leadership.
Category Four: Self-Confidence

The theme of self-confidence was apparent in thirteen of the participants. Self-confidence is broadly defined as an individual’s ability to recognize their abilities, trust their actions and emotions, and feel love for themselves (Kukulu et al., 2013). These thoughts in individuals tend to lead to a feeling of positive well-being. One participant summarized this category when they compared how they perceive how their overall confidence compares to others’ confidence. Participant 1010 disclosed:

I have my confident days where I’m feeling really good and so forth. Then usually something will happen, somebody will say, "Stop," or they put some type of hesitation out there for me, and then my confidence drops. Most people it would drop just a little bit. Mine drops drastically.

The participants described influences on their self-confidence. Precisely, they described how they lacked confidence in their judgment, abilities, and even feelings related to the toxic leader. These distinct yet interconnected aspects of self-confidence are described as subcategories in the following sections.

Subcategory A: Lack of Confidence in their Judgement. Participants described concern surrounding their ability to judge a situation and take appropriate actions. This concern specifically related to their decision to continue to work for a toxic leader and allowing themselves to be treated in such a toxic manner. Participant 8008 summarized this subcategory:

There's just so much questioning of myself around that as well, and my judge of character, and my judge of leadership, and good leadership and what that is. So I think it's going to take a long time to get over that part of it.
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Other participants shared this sentiment; some even compared their lived experience to Stockholm syndrome. Participant 1023 imparted, “It’s almost like Stockholm syndrome sometimes, you don't know how bad it is when you're in it, and now that I'm out of it, I was like, "Why did I put up with that for so long?" Still, other participants expressed frustration with themselves, describing their behavior as ridiculous. Participant 1109 revealed:

And so I just, I was very mad at myself for a while that I put up with that. I guess, sort of like an abusive relationship. Why did I let this person keep hitting me? Like, I'm stronger than that, I'm braver than that. I have the ability to stand up for myself, and yet I just kept going back to this job. It's like, it was ridiculous.

As seen in these quotes, participants expressed concern and frustration surrounding their ability to judge a situation correctly and take appropriate actions. The participants described not seeing how bad it was when reporting to the leader. Additionally, the participants expressed frustration with themselves for not seeing this and, as a result, not leaving sooner.

Subcategory B: Lack of Confidence in their Abilities. Not only did participants express a lack of confidence in their judgment, which persists today. The participants also expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities. More precisely, the participants discussed how the previous toxic leader influences confidence in their abilities today. When asked about the long-term influences of toxic leadership, Participant 4004 communicated they doubt their abilities:

I think that that negatively impacted, I guess, a little bit of my self-worth, for lack of better words, and it's something that I still think probably even translates a little
bit. Sometimes I doubt my abilities if I'm at the table. Right now, I'm in a director role. I manage a whole center, but sometimes I think, "Oh, my gosh. Should I be here? Am I competent enough? Am I qualified enough?"

A similar sentiment was echoed by Participant 3003 when they were recounting their reluctance to share their current high-level position:

Yeah, and time to learn to own it, and be like, "Yeah, I earned this. I have earned this." But I feel like some of the leftover of that is like I would hear my former toxic leader be like something along the lines of like I didn't deserve it or that kind of thing.

These participants, along with several others, discussed how the toxic leader’s negative influence continues to inform how they perceive their abilities. As a result, the participants often doubted their abilities in their current positions. The lack of self-confidence in abilities lead to second-guessing actions, performance, or even worth.

Subcategory C: Lack of Confidence in their Feelings. The last subcategory surprised the researcher. While the current literature, as discussed in Chapter Two, would indicate possible lingering influence on follower judgments and confidence, it did not indicate anything about followers second-guessing their feelings surrounding the toxic leader. Specifically, study participants questioned if their current feelings about the experience of reporting to a toxic leader were “normal.” The researcher documented this in many ways, including counting the number of participants who wanted to see the results of the study, the questions about toxic leaders they asked during the interview, and most notably, the questions they asked about the “validity” of their feelings. For example, Participant 8008 asked, “Am I alone in how I feel about this experience? I wanted to do
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this interview to learn if others feel the same way.” Other participants repeated this sentiment:

But yeah, it's kind of made me have more questions to be like [sic], is my experience unusual? Or is it actually pretty common? And I just never talked to anybody about it, because I assumed I was the problem. Because I'm a sensitive person. Does that make sense? What I'm saying? (Participant 2002)

I'd love to see and hear some of the feedback. Of course, without names and all that, but what you're hearing from other people, like is similar to how I've felt? Am I not crazy because they felt the same way, or I don't know it's just...and what type of leaders are out there creating this toxic feeling? (Participant 1244)

From the participant’s questions, statements, and desire to learn, the researcher summarized previous toxic leaders, influence followers’ feelings about their emotions and thoughts around the experience. The participants seemed to seek validation in their feelings. Or, in other words, participants wondered if others were as influenced as they were by the experience of reporting to a toxic leader.

**Category Five: Ability to Trust**

Trust is the willingness of an individual to be vulnerable to another party who performs some sort of action relevant to the individual (Mayer et al., 1995). Fourteen participants expressed how their previous toxic leaders have influenced their ability to trust. Specifically, participants discussed struggling to trust their current leader and organization despite having positive feelings associated with both. Participant 8008 summarized the distrust at both levels, “I think it definitely influenced my trust in
relationships in general and I guess that's trust in personal relationships, and then maybe I guess it's a trust in institutions.” Participant 1509 communicated similar sentiments:

Even though I love working at [current organization], and trust, there's still a side of me that has this lack of trust…When's the other shoe going to drop? When am I going to be...When is somebody not going to make good on a promise that's been made to me?

Not all participants discussed trust at the organization level; many described trust more associated with personal relationships. Specifically, participants discussed being more protective of their trust and, as a result, being more observant before trusting others. Participant 1244 stated, “I think I came into this position, probably in a little bit of protective mode, I think I'm more observant as to how this leader runs things.” Similarly, Participant 2002 shared:

I tend to be pretty Pollyanna about people's personalities. And I assume that everyone is a good person until they prove me wrong. But it has made me just kind of sit back and be more contemplative when I'm getting to know someone.

Interestingly, one study participant researches trust. This participant discussed trust from many angles and the experience they go through at their current place of employment to address their reluctance to trust. The participant espoused:

And learning how to trust people again is, whether it's colleagues, or trying to figure out, sort of stopping my automatic response or my bolt response of who should I be trusting, who should I not be trusting? What is the politicking that's going on? Do I need to be doing that? Is this person trustable? And then some of that's all very natural when you go into a new culture. Except that, I was coming
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from a very, very guarded, distrustful place, right? I had operated that way for 14 years. And so trying to dismantle some of those kinds of things and how to engage with colleagues and have genuine relationships with my new supervisor.

As seen in this section, the study’s participants expressed their previous toxic leader influences their ability to trust. These influences include trust in leaders, organizations, and people. The participants' reluctance to trust often made them refer to themselves as more “cynical” (Participant 1023) or “hesitant” (Participant 9009).

Category Six: Appreciation for Current Work Situation

Four of the six categories presented can be categorized as unfavorable; meaning, the previous toxic leaders’ influences represent a behavior, action, or belief that can be seen as detrimental to the follower. Two of the categories represent manners in which the toxic leader continues to influence past followers positively. One of these categories is Category Six. Category Six represents an overall appreciation the participants had for their current work situation. Explicitly, 13 participants expressed gratitude for people, actions, and behaviors that could be seen as expected from a work environment.

Participants espoused their general level of appreciation in many ways. Some, such as Participant 1509, were broadly stated, “I'm enormously grateful now. I have this level of gratitude and perspective now.” Similar, Participant 1244 shared, “I can definitely say I'm much more appreciative of the environment that I'm in now.”

Others were more specific in what they were appreciative of in their current environment. Participant 2002 expressed gratitude for their current leader “I guess it just made me so much more appreciative when you have a good boss. It's not lost on me that
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not everyone is afforded that luxury, to have a boss who cares about your well-being.”

Participant 7007 expressed gratitude for systems to support initiatives:

You could tell that basically when we decided as a group to go in a certain
direction, there were systems in place and things that were going to happen and
fall into place in order to move forward with the initiative. That was very
refreshing to be able to experience that.

Last, but certainly not least, participants expressed gratitude for their lives outside
of work and not having to live with anxiety caused by work stress. Participant 1244
described gratitude about not worrying about their next day at work each night:

More excited, more relaxed when I go home, and I'm smiling, and when I walk
out the door in the morning, [partner] will look at me, and he'll say, "Well, I hope
you have a good day." And then he'll go, "Well, of course, you're going to." It
used to be before, "Be strong, you can do this." And now it's, "You're going to
have a good day." He just knows already. He can see that I'm much more relaxed
in the evenings, I'm not panicked all the time, I'm not feeling that anxiety of
what's to come tomorrow and I don't know, it's just a whole different feeling, and
I'm sure it'll be better even more over time that I don't even realize.

Participant 1366 summarized the essence of this subcategory, being appreciative
for “basic things” associated with new work environments:

I was really unhealthy mentally because of that toxicity and just the every day,
that pressure and the needing to protect yourself, and trying to figure out who can
I engage with in relationships and how to navigate that space, because nothing
really was, there wasn't a productive, consistent way to do that. And so, having a
year where I don't have that. It's like this huge layer of stress and anxiety and...
criticism, but not, I love some critical feedback. But there's criticism, and then
there's degrading. And so to live without that is kind of earth-shattering, and yet
it's so basic, right? It's such a basic, basic thing.

The participants’ sentiments presented in this section represent one of the two
positive influences discovered in this study. Previous toxic leaders influence followers
who no longer report to them by influencing their level of appreciation. Explicitly, the
past followers of toxic leaders expressed appreciation for the little things many would
assume are “normal” in a work environment: a good boss, systems to support goals, and
not feeling stressed or anxious about work while at home.

**Findings**

Researchers use qualitative descriptive studies to provide comprehensive
summaries of phenomena in everyday terms (Sandelowski, 2000; Vais moradi et al.,
2013). Specifically, qualitative descriptive studies aim to provide factual descriptions of a
selected phenomenon to increase the understanding of the phenomenon across disciplines
(Colorafi & Evans, 2016). To increase the desired understanding, the researchers stay
close to the data and present the data collected in a straightforward fashion instead of an
interpretive or theoretical manner (Colorafi & Evans, 2016: Kahlke, 2014). The goal of
this qualitative descriptive study was to provide factual information about how previous
toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them with minimal
interpretation. Meaning, the researcher aimed to highlight the data collected in its natural
state to help explain this scarcely studied aspect of toxic leadership.
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Every interview offered a window into the lived experience of individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders and do not now. Each participant had a unique story and experience, which the graciously shared with the researcher. While each story was unique, there were commonalities in the stories and experiences. These shared themes allowed the researcher to develop clear codes, categories, and subcategories. The final six categories and corresponding 10 subcategories allow a better understanding of how previous toxic leaders continue to influence their followers' lives after their official work relationship has ended.

Category One: Changing Followers as People

First, the participants in this study consistently shared reporting to a toxic leader changed them as a person. Specifically, the participants did not view their past toxic leader as merely a “bad boss” who influences them today. Instead, they perceived the experience of reporting to a toxic leader as a life-changing event. The participants offered three specific ways in which they were changed as people. To start with, the participants shared health ailments that occurred when reporting to the toxic leader and how these ailments are now forever part of their story. Next, the participants described reporting to a toxic leader as a traumatic experience that still haunts them today. Specifically, participants experienced strong emotions when thinking about, talking about, or being reminded of the toxic leader. Lastly, participants shared their lives were changed because their previous toxic leader stunted participants’ professional growth during and after reporting to the toxic leader. For these three main reasons, the participants did not just view the toxic leader as someone who influences them now. Instead, the participants perceived the toxic leader as someone who changed them and their life stories. It is
importarnote this category is more profound than the researcher expected, and discovering this category was surprising.

**Category Two: Current Work Lives**

Second, the vast majority of the participants discussed how their previous toxic leader continues to influence their work lives today. Participants discussed needing to be “re-programmed” and needing to learn how to “restructure” the daily act of work. This reprogramming and restructuring, according to the participants, occurs in two distinct areas of their work lives. To begin, participants' thoughts and emotions are influenced by their previous toxic leader. Meaning the participants shared they have heightened emotional and mental responses to events in their current work lives. Next, the participants shared their current behaviors and actions at work, at times, are more aligned with what was needed under their previous toxic leader than what is needed now. In other words, the participants described their current emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and actions at work are often not aligned with the current work situation. Instead, these items are more aligned with what was necessary when reporting to their toxic leader. Thus, the previous toxic leader continues to influence past followers’ work lives.

**Category Three: Leadership**

The third distinct way the participants shared their previous toxic leader continues to influence them today centered around leadership. Participants discussed learning something about leadership from their previous toxic leaders. The majority of participants who were in leadership positions offered ways their previous toxic leaders shaped and continue to shape their leadership practice. More precisely, the participants shared how they structure their leadership practice to be completely different from their toxic leader.
Other participants offered more general lessons they learned about leadership. Specifically, participants shared their toxic leader taught them how to compare and contrast “good” leaders. In summary, toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them by influencing the followers’ leadership.

**Category Four: Self-Confidence**

The fourth theme that emerged from the data centered on self-confidence. Many participants shared ways their previous toxic leader continues to influence their self-confidence. The manners in which the previous toxic leader influences self-confidence varied in participants. Some participants discussed a loss of confidence in their judgment. Specifically, they questioned their ability to appropriately assess a situation and take appropriate actions (e.g., identifying someone as a toxic leader and leaving). Other participants described a lack of confidence in their abilities or self-worth. These individuals discussed questioning their abilities in current positions because of the doubt created by their previous toxic leader. Still, others expressed a lack of confidence in their feelings. Interestingly, these participants questioned how they felt about the toxic leader and their experience. In other words, participants wondered if it was “normal” to feel influenced or emotional by the experience of reporting to a toxic leader. The previous toxic leader continues to influence followers who are no longer reporting to them by influencing followers’ self-confidence.

**Category Five: Ability to Trust**

Similar to the last category, yet still distinct, participants discussed how their previous toxic leader influences their ability to trust. The participants shared they are more reluctant to trust individuals and organizations now because of their past
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experience. Additionally, participants communicated, even though they are happy now, they still worry about “the other shoe dropping” and someone violating their trust. Interestingly, several participants discussed a desire to trust more completely again. Meaning, participants were aware they were less trusting or more cynical, and they wanted to change those aspects about themselves. The followers espoused their previous toxic leaders influence them by continuing to influence their ability to trust.

Category Six: Appreciation for Current Work Situation

The last significant way previous toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them is the toxic leader influences the followers’ level of appreciation and gratitude. Explicitly, all participants expressed a deep sense of appreciation for their current work environment, leader, or life. The participants shared examples of “small things” or items many would assume as “normal” (e.g., a boss who cares, systems in place to support initiatives, not feeling anxious at home about work) they were grateful for in their current lives. The experience of working for a toxic leader seems to have offered a new level of appreciation for a “normal” work environment.

The researcher identified these six main categories by listening to the participants’ stories, voices, and experiences. Additionally, the researcher identified connections between themes and overlap. For example, changing as a person because of a traumatic experience could make someone less confident in their abilities. Or the reluctance to trust could influence an individual’s feelings and emotions at work. Thus, there is some overlap in the categories identified. This overlap supports an even greater synergistic understanding of the research question studied (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The synergy
(see Figure 3) between these categories aided the researcher in identifying a potential solution. This solution is presented in Chapter Five.

**Figure 3**

*Connections/Synergy Between Identified Categories*

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**Discussion**

As with any research study, the findings of this study should not be considered in a vacuum. Nor should the findings in this study be presumed to be without limitations. This study’s findings must be contemplated in conjunction with previous literature. Additionally, strengths and limitations need to be identified. The alignment, strength, and limitations are discussed in this section.

**Alignment to Current Literature**

Chapter Two presented a review of the current toxic leadership literature. The majority of this research centered around the followers’ perceptions of their leaders when the followers reported to the toxic leaders. The literature is much scarcer when it comes to the long-term influences of toxic leadership (Carleton, 2016; Oh & Farh, 2017).
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Nonetheless, the studies that centered around the long-term influences indicated the negative influence toxic leaders have on their followers does not end when the follower no longer reports to the toxic leader. Instead, the results indicated individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders continue to be influenced by their experience (Carleton et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2018). This study’s findings align with these studies and extended the understanding of the long-term influences of toxic leadership by including the followers’ voices, which are missing from the current literature.

The findings in this study also align with the current literature as study participants discussed many of the individual harms discussed in previous studies. As discussed in the Individual Harms section of Chapter Two, the current research shows, toxic leaders harm followers at an individual level (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a; Weber & Fuller, 2019). Specifically, the research shows the influence on followers’ job satisfaction (Saleh et al., 2018; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015), stress (Berdahl et al., 2018; Williams, 2018), and affective well-being (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Lopes et al., 2019). This study’s participants discussed being less satisfied with their jobs, experiencing stress, and suffering from health ailments when reporting to a toxic leader. Thus, the participants’ described lived experiences align with the current literature.

Strengths

This study has many strengths, with two being more notable than others. First, the study’s findings, as discussed in the previous section, align with the current understanding of toxic leadership. Explicitly, the findings do not contradict any previous findings; thus, demonstrating confidence in the findings. Not only do the findings align with our current understanding or toxic leadership influences, but also the findings extend
the current understanding by including follower voices. The other notable strength centers around the selection criteria utilized by the researcher in this study. As discussed in the Participant Selection and Data Collection Tools sections of Chapter Three, the researcher utilized a reliable and valid instrument to identify participants who reported to a toxic leader in their past and do not now. This means the researcher is confident the voices amplified in this study are indeed individuals who previously reported to a toxic leader.

Limitations

As discussed in Chapter One, this dissertation in practice research study is not without limitations. Specifically, qualitative descriptive studies offer a straightforward description of an understudied phenomenon without having to stay grounded in a specific theory (Sandelowski, 2000, 2009). The lack of a grounding theory in the analysis could be interpreted as a limitation of this study. Additionally, the researcher interviewed 17 participants. This sample size does not allow the researcher to extend these findings broadly. Also, the composition of the study’s participants can be seen as a limitation. As seen in the Participant section of Chapter Four, the study’s participants were predominately female, White, highly-educated, and worked in education-related fields. More research would be needed to explore how the long-term influences of toxic leaders influence other followers.

Summary

The current literature shows toxic leaders harm organizations and followers when they report to the toxic leader (Weberg & Fuller, 2019). This dissertation in practice research study expanded our understanding of toxic leader influences by exploring how
previous toxic leaders continue to influence followers who no longer report to a toxic leader. To accomplish this goal, the researcher interviewed 17 individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders. The data collected from these interviews, presented in this chapter, allowed the researcher to create six categories to answer the research question, “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?” Specifically, the researcher concluded previous toxic leaders influence followers in six core ways. First, previous toxic leaders change followers as people. Second, previous toxic leaders influence followers' current work lives. Third, previous toxic leaders influence their followers’ leadership. Fourth and fifth, previous toxic leaders influence followers’ self-confidence and ability to trust. Finally, previous toxic leaders influence followers’ appreciation for their current work environment. These six categories were used to inform a proposed solution and implications for future research presented in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Toxic leaders are leaders who often engage in counterproductive behaviors with their followers (Burns, 2017; Schmidt, 2008). As a result, toxic leaders leave their followers and organizations worse than when they found them (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b). As exemplified in Chapter Two, numerous researchers have studied the various negative influences toxic leaders have on their followers and organizations. However, few studies have been conducted to understand how toxic leaders continue to influence followers after they no longer report to the toxic leader (Carleton et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). This dissertation in practice research study added to the scarce knowledge about the long-term influences of toxic leadership. Specifically, the researcher conducted a qualitative descriptive study to explore how previous toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them.

As described in Chapter Four, the researcher identified six specific ways toxic leaders continue to influence their past followers. Previous toxic leaders continue to influence their past followers by changing them as people. Additionally, previous toxic leaders influence followers’ current work lives, leadership thoughts, self-confidence, ability to trust, and appreciation for their current lives. Chapter Five builds on these findings and offers recommendations aimed at limiting the negative influences toxic leaders have on their followers by helping organizations and leaders understand the gravity of toxic leadership behaviors and actions. Individuals need to understand the ramifications of their behaviors and actions to incite change. This chapter offers recommendations and potential strategies for overcoming barriers for implementation. Additionally, this chapter offers implications for practice and future research.
Aim Statement

The aim of this dissertation in practice research study was to learn about the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers by listening to the past followers of toxic leaders describe how this experience has influenced them. Once these influences are better understood, the stories of these followers can be used to create change. The researcher used the examples provided by the followers who participated in the current study to create a set of recommendations for organizations and leadership consultants to prevent toxic leadership and minimize its influences. The stories of the followers may also serve to illuminate additional reasons why organizations need to prevent and mitigate toxic leadership in their organizations. Additionally, leadership consultants or coaches can use this knowledge in future trainings to help prevent leaders from engaging in toxic leadership behaviors. Individuals need to understand the true ramifications of behaviors, actions, and people to incite change.

Proposed Solution

Proposed Solution’s Goals

Before discussing the proposed solution, it is vital to understand the solution’s goal. The proposed solution’s goal is to help mitigate toxic leadership in an organization. By eliminating toxic leadership in an organization, future harms on followers can be prevented, and, as a result, fewer lives can be negatively influenced by toxic leaders.

The proposed solution’s goal is not aimed at fully mitigating the previous harms caused by toxic leaders. Or more precisely, the current research study showed past followers of toxic leaders were changed as people. The proposed solution does not aim to “undo” how individuals were changed. Instead, the proposed solution is forward-looking,
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aimed at preventing future toxic leaders. As Theodore Roosevelt famously proclaimed, “The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future.” This dissertation in practice research study allowed us to learn more about past toxic leaders' influence and how it could persist. The solution focuses on how an organization can better prepare for the future by eliminating toxic leadership from the organization.

With these items in mind, the proposed solution focuses on two fundamental tenets necessary for removing toxic leadership in an organization: awareness and accountability. Specifically, the solution, like the current study, focuses on amplifying the voices of the followers. The proposed solution empowers followers to use their voices to report toxic leaders by creating clear expectations of acceptable leadership and by providing avenues and allies to identify toxic leaders. This proposal could also be modified for leadership consultants working with individuals experiencing toxic leadership. However, for simplicity’s sake, the solution is proposed below at the organization level.

The Leadership Culture Code Solution

Leadership Culture Code Overview

The goal of a Leadership Culture Code (LCC) is to aid an organization in preventing toxic leadership. The LCC does so by explicitly stating expectations and holding leaders accountable. The LCC would function similar to a mission statement, vision statement, and organizational values. Mission statements, vision statements, and organizational values define the identity of the organization to stakeholders (Gioia et al., 2000). In addition to these core identity attestations, many organizations have decided to add diversity and inclusion statements to signify their strong commitment to diversity and
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inclusion (Jonsen et al., 2019). These diversity and inclusion statements compliment mission statements, vision statements, and organizational values by communicating to all stakeholders the organization’s intentional focus on diversity and inclusion efforts.

The LCC will be similar in nature, scope, and focus as diversity and inclusion statements and strengthen an organization’s public identity. The LCC will define the leadership identity of an organization and provide a framework for holding leaders accountable for their actions. More importantly, the LCC will provide followers a clear picture of what behaviors are acceptable from leaders. This clarity helps remove the subjectivity often associated with acceptable leadership practices. To accomplish this, the LCC would include an overall philosophy of leadership for an organization and specific behaviors and actions expected of leaders. Table 4 offers an example of a potential LCC.

**Table 4**

*Leadership Culture Code Example*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization XYZ</th>
<th>Leadership Culture Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>At XYZ Organization, our leaders are responsible for creating safe, supportive, and collaborative environments where our team members can grow and use their strengths to excel. We believe leadership requires empathy, innovation, and a desire to learn. The following statements outline who XYZ leaders are and how they behave:</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders put people first, always.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders support their teams and are willing to “roll-up” their sleeves to get the job done.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders always treat others with respect.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders allow team members to grow by exposing them to new ideas.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders value training and dedicate resources to training team members.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders are trustworthy, ethical, honest, and kind.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders uncomplicate processes, allowing team members to succeed.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>XYZ leaders promote a healthy work-life balance.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* This study’s participants' comments about their toxic leaders informed the example culture code; the opposing behaviors and traits were used.
Leadership Culture Code Four-Step Solution

The Leadership Culture Code (LCC) creation is only one part of the proposed solution. Once the LCC is created, the organization would need to communicate the LCC broadly and train all organizational leaders and followers. Following the training, the organization would need to hold leaders accountable for behaving in accordance with the LCC. The proposed four steps are based on the two tenets listed in the Proposed Solution’s Goals section: awareness and accountability. Figure 4 outlines the four steps of the Leadership Culture Code solution. Each step is described in the following sections.

Figure 4

Leadership Culture Code Four-Step Process

- **Step 1 (Awareness)**
  - Create Organization’s Leadership Culture Code

- **Step 2 (Awareness)**
  - Communicate LCC broadly to stakeholders

- **Step 3 (Awareness & Accountability)**
  - Train organization on LCC (training for both leaders and followers)

- **Step 4 (Accountability)**
  - Hold leaders accountable for LCC expectations

*Step One: Create the Leadership Culture Code.* The first step needed to cultivate awareness of toxic leadership and unacceptable leadership behaviors is the creation of the Leadership Culture Code (LCC). The creation of the LCC would follow the steps typically used to inform, create, and modify mission statements, vision statements, and organizational values. Specifically, senior leadership or leadership consultants would
seek input from multiple data sources, including current research and input from key stakeholders.

Data cited in this dissertation in practice research study and this study’s findings could serve as a starting point for establishing the need for the LCC. Specifically, this dissertation in practice research study found there are long-term influences of toxic leadership. Most notably, the participants espoused reporting to a toxic leader changed them as people. The participants offered three specific ways in which they were changed as people. First, the participants shared health ailments that occurred when reporting to the toxic leader and how these ailments are now forever part of their story. Second, the participants described reporting to a toxic leader as a traumatic experience that still haunts them today. Third, participants shared their lives were changed because their previous toxic leader stunted participants’ professional growth during and after reporting to the toxic leader. These findings demonstrate that a toxic leader is more than a “bad boss.” Toxic leaders change followers' lives in often negative ways. This knowledge supports the need for an organization not to tolerate toxic leaders and toxic leadership behaviors, thus creating the need and basis for LCC creation.

In addition to consulting current toxic leadership research to create the LCC, the organization should identify positive leadership beliefs and actions to form the actual LCC. To accomplish this, the organization should consult positive leadership theories (e.g., servant leadership, inclusive leadership, and authentic leadership) and seek input from its stakeholders. Precisely, the organization could survey all employees to learn about what they consider positive leadership. Additionally, the organization could ask the employees to rate leadership in the organization. The data gathered from this survey
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could assist the organization in three ways: inform the items to be included in the LCC, identify current gaps in leadership at the organization presently, and serve as a data-point to gauge the effectiveness of the LCC after implementation.

The organization, led by the senior leadership team or leadership consultants, would create the LCC after collecting data. Or, in other words, the data should inform the creation of the LCC. Once the LCC is created, the organization would move to create a communication plan to communicate the LCC broadly.

**Step Two: Communicate the Leadership Culture Code to Stakeholders.** Once created, the Leadership Culture Code (LCC) must be communicated to all stakeholders to create awareness. More specifically, the LCC should become a founding principle of the organization and be visible. The visibility of the LCC is vital as it aids in transparency within the organization about what it means to be a leader in the organization. Leaders can use the LCC as a guiding force in shaping their leadership practice. Followers could utilize the LCC to shape their leadership expectations.

Hence, the organization should develop a communication plan to ensure the LCC reaches both leaders and followers. The communication plan, which will differ by organization, should include, at minimum, the following items: communication to the organization, communication to all stakeholders, placement on the organization’s digital sites (e.g., website, social media sites, internal digital spaces, etc.), printed pieces of the LCC to be placed where mission statements, vision statements, and core values are displayed, and follow-up communications to help with LCC acceptance. Another item the organization should include in the communication plan is the training plan, discussed in the following section.
**Step Three: Train Organization on the Leadership Culture Code.**

Communicating the Leadership Culture Code (LCC), while necessary, will not alone incite the change needed within an organization to avert toxic leadership. More precisely, establishing the LCC and communicating the LCC will not remove toxic leaders from an organization as these steps solely focus on awareness. To incite change, accountability is also needed. For accountability to exist, both leaders and followers need to know precisely what actions align with the LCC and which ones align with toxic leadership. Thus, training on the LCC and toxic leadership is needed.

The findings in the current study support the idea of training. More precisely, the past followers proclaimed their toxic leader taught them about leadership. The participants shared they learned “what not to do” in leadership from their toxic leaders. This finding can be used to inform training for the LCC. Specifically, the LCC training (see Table 5) compares and contrasts LCC tenets to toxic leadership, creating an awareness about what is good leadership and what is toxic.

**Table 5**

*Sample Outline for LCC Training*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject/Content</th>
<th>Training (Leader/Follower/Both)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of leadership (Leader-follower relationship, leadership types and philosophies, toxic leadership, toxic leadership influences, long-term toxic leadership influences).</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Leadership Culture Code (what it is, how it works, and what each component means-with examples provided).</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the LCC to eradicate toxic leadership (comparing LCC tenets to toxic leadership behaviors, using LCC tenets to create safe and supportive environments for team members, how to build confidence in team members,)</td>
<td>Leader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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cultivating trust, making the leader-follower relationship a meaningful one, holding other leaders accountable).
How to hold your leader accountable (identifying behaviors not aligned with LCC, addressing concerns with a leader, and avenues to report toxic behaviors).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note: The table represents a brief outline that could be used to guide a full training solution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated previously, the training is critical to creating awareness in leaders and followers. The LCC training is designed to educate the organizations’ leaders on appropriate leadership behaviors and traits. To accomplish this, the training, as seen in Table 6, will teach leaders ways to create safe environments for their followers. Furthermore, leaders will learn about what constitutes toxic leadership and the potential ramifications of toxic leadership behaviors. The goal of this training is to help leaders understand the vital role they have in their followers’ lives. Specifically, the LCC training aims to incite change in leadership behaviors by teaching leaders the harms they could cause if they behave in ways aligned with toxic leadership.

It is important to note a distinguishing feature of the LCC training: the training of followers. Typically, when organizations provide leadership training, the training is geared solely towards the leaders. Meaning, the followers do not receive training about how leaders should and should not behave. The LCC training intentionally involves followers in the training. The goal of including followers is twofold. First, the training will help followers be aware of how leaders should behave. This awareness could help followers feel more confident in identifying toxic leadership. Second, the knowledge gained in the awareness component can lead to the accountability component of the solution. Specifically, if followers are aware of what is and is not acceptable, they could
feel more confident in their feelings about leadership. More precisely, followers would feel more confident about what is and is not acceptable leadership behavior. As a result, this confidence would make followers more likely to report toxic leaders or toxic leader behaviors to appropriate parties when toxic leadership behaviors are observed. Moreover, the LCC training includes a section on how followers can hold leaders accountable by addressing the behaviors and reporting the leader as needed. Training in these areas will equip followers with the skills needed to hold leaders accountable, which is needed to eradicate toxic leadership in an organization.

**Step Four: Hold Leaders Accountable for Leadership Culture Code**

*Expectations.* Once all leaders and followers are trained on the Leadership Culture Code (LCC), all leaders must be held accountable for upholding the LCC. More precisely, if a leader is acting in a way counter to the LCC, the leader must be accountable for these actions. Too often, toxic leaders are allowed to persist in organizations, causing harm, because no one addresses their behaviors. For the LCC to successfully eradicate toxic leaders within an organization, four entities, as seen in Figure 5, must be accountable for reporting, addressing, and not tolerating toxic leaders. These entities include the organization itself (referring to structures, policies, and culture), the leaders of leaders, colleagues or peers, and, most importantly, the followers.
First, the organization must hold leaders accountable by creating ways to identify toxic leaders. Some potential ways an organization could accomplish this include the following:

- surveys where followers evaluate their leaders,
- requiring skip-level meetings for all leaders,
- anonymous feedback channels for followers to report leaders,
- 360-performance reviews for leaders, and
- establishing remediation process for reported leaders, including removal if improvements are not achieved.
The success of these organizational strategies largely depends on three other groups: leaders of leaders, colleagues/peers, and followers. The leaders of leaders group refers to the leaders who have other leaders reporting to them. Many higher-level leaders within an organization have followers who are also leaders. In those instances, the higher-level leader must create ways to evaluate their followers’ leadership competencies and address any toxic leadership behaviors. Often leaders focus their conversations on projects, results, and tasks. The LCC solution asks leaders to include leadership practice in these conversations. Specifically, the leaders of leaders must be accountable for the leadership practices of the leaders who report to them. If those leaders are toxic, it is their leader’s responsibility to hold them accountable.

Another group that also needs to be accountable for leaders’ behaviors are leaders’ colleagues or peers (e.g., members of the leaders’ peer groups). These leaders will also be trained and versed in the LCC and toxic leadership. If one of these leaders witnessed another leader behaving in ways not aligned with the LCC. The leader witnessing this behavior needs to have the ability to hold the leader accountable. Specifically, they should address the behavior and report it through the organizational channels.

Last, and most importantly, followers need to be able to hold leaders accountable. In many instances, followers, as identified in the current study, are deeply influenced by toxic leaders. Meaning followers, more than likely, have the most to lose if leaders do not behave in accordance with the LCC. Additionally, followers are the most likely party to witness toxic leadership, as toxic leadership behaviors are typically directed at followers. Thus, followers need to be able to hold their leaders accountable for their actions.
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Specifically, followers need to be able to discuss their concerns with their leaders and have the ability to report toxicity to other leaders or the organization. The followers’ voices are needed to eradicate toxic leadership in an organization.

The accountability step in the LCC solution is perhaps the most critical of all the steps. Specifically, the LCC establishes a public statement of what it means to be a leader within the organization. The communication and training support the LCC by adding awareness and skills. However, none of these steps will matter if leaders are not held accountable to the LCC. The organization and everyone in the organization must be prepared to identify, address, and remove toxic leaders for the LCC to make a difference in the organization’s leadership culture.

Evidence that Supports the Solution

The Leadership Culture Code Solution, presented in the previous section, is supported by evidence. The findings in this dissertation in practice research study support the solution. Additionally, the literature used to inform this study supports the solution.

This Dissertation in Practice Research Study

The current research study supports the Leadership Culture Code solution proposed in this chapter. The study’s findings identified six ways in which toxic leaders continue to influence followers who no longer report to them. Of these six influences, four were negative. Followers reported their lives were forever changed by their previous toxic leader through medical, mental, and traumatic experiences (Categories 1.a, 1.b), and by not growing professionally because of the toxic leader (Category 1.c). Additionally, followers reported their previous toxic leaders continue to influence their current work lives (Category 2), their confidence (Category 4), and their ability to trust (Category 5).
These findings demonstrate a need for organizations to prevent followers from toxic leaders. Explicitly, these findings should signal to organizations that a toxic leader is more than a “bad boss.” Instead, toxic leaders can influence their followers' lives for many years after the relationship ends. This finding should help organizations understand the true power leaders have on their followers' lives. Hopefully, this understanding will incite change on how organizations perceive leaders and, as a result, become less accepting of toxic leaders; thus, supporting the need for the LCC solution.

In addition to the negative influences found in the study, the two positive influences found, leadership (Category 3) and appreciation (Category 6), also guide the proposed solution. Correctly, the LCC solution’s central goal is to eradicate toxic leadership in an organization. To accomplish this, all individuals within an organization need to understand toxic leadership better (Subcategory 3.b), and leaders need to improve their leadership practice (Subcategory 3.b). The training portion of the LCC solution directly aligns with the leadership findings in the current study.

Moreover, the LCC solution aligns with this dissertation in practice research study in six direct ways (see Appendix K). Each category and subcategory were used to establish a portion of the solution. The finding followers were forever changed by previous toxic leaders guided the LCC goal. The current work lives, leadership, and self-confidence, trust guided the training component. The ability to trust category informed the communication and accountability aspects of the LCC solution. The appreciation finding was considered as a thread throughout the LCC solution. Furthermore, the solution presented aligns with the current study in a critical way: both the study and
solution and the study amplify followers’ voices. Like the study, the LCC solution listens to the followers of toxic leaders and uses their stories to inform decisions.

It is also important to restate an assertion made earlier in the section. The LCC solution is not attempting to “solve” the negative influences the study participants’ discussed. Instead, the LCC solution builds upon these findings as additional reasons to prevent toxic leaders from existing in organizations. The LCC attempts to improve the future of leadership by learning from the past.

**Literature Informing the Current Study**

Chapter Two presented a thorough overview of the current literature surrounding toxic leadership. This literature, as previously discussed, showed toxic leadership is common, wide-spread, and harmful at both the organization and individual level. The literature supported the notion leaders are important and influential in an organization. Countless researchers (e.g., Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2018; Mathieu & Babiak, 2016; Saleh et al., 2018) called for more leadership training as a way to address toxic leadership. The Society of Human Resource Management (2017) agrees with this contention and cited developing leaders as a critical need both now and for the next ten years. Thus, the current literature strongly supports a concentrated effort on eradicating toxic leadership. Additionally, this literature supports leadership training and holding leaders accountable.

**Evidence that Challenges the Solution**

An aspirational goal of the Leadership Culture Code will be to prevent toxic leadership in organizations. As stated throughout this dissertation, the current literature overwhelming illustrates the grave consequences of toxic leadership. Thus, the researcher
is not aware of any evidence that would challenge the LCC solution or its goals. However, just because the evidence does not exist to contradict the proposed solution, it does not mean the Leadership Culture Code solution will be universally embraced or accepted. The LCC solution can be compared to organizational missions, and organizational missions can be challenged or falter within organizations. Berlan (2018) shared missions face several challenges: environmental, organizational, and social-relational. It is appropriate to assume the LCC could face the same challenges. The solution may be influenced by pressures external to the organization (e.g., the current pandemic and feasibility to execute the solution), internal to the organization (e.g., financial and human capital resources), and social-relational (e.g., acceptance by the organization’s employees). These factors could likely create some resistance in organizations to accept and embrace the LCC solution.

**Implementation of the Proposed Solution**

The previous section discussed the Leadership Culture Code (LCC) solution. The LCC could be used in any organization and could be used by leadership consultants and coaches working with organizations. For these reasons, factors and timelines could vary in organizations. This section provides a broad implementation plan for the LCC solution.

**Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution**

There are several factors a leader should consider before implementing the Leadership Culture Code at their organization. As discussed above, there three central pressures that influence the effectiveness of organizational mission statements: external factors, internal factors, and social-relational factors (Berlan, 2018). The organization
needs to consider each of these factors before implementing the LCC solution. Each of these pressures is discussed below.

**External Factors**

Before embarking on the Leadership Culture Code solution, an organization would need to evaluate external factors that could influence the success of the LCC. Specifically, the organization needs to consider the factors outside of their control. A current example of this is the current state of the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. External pressures, or factors, have changed how we work and perhaps how we will work for the foreseeable future. Specifically, travel and meeting for trainings “in-person,” at least now, may not be possible. Thus, a leader should take this in mind when building out the LCC implementation plan.

Additionally, the pandemic has caused new stressors for employees and leaders. People are learning how to work from their homes with competing priorities and rely on new strategies for communication and collaboration. These challenges are impacting leaders and influencing how they lead. The changing world and the role leaders play in it supports the need for the LCC solution.

A leader who chooses to implement this solution or lead the charge to implement this solution will not be able to overcome external factors. By definition, external factors are outside of a leader’s control. Having said that, they can be mindful of these factors and ensure the implementation plan is aligned with external factors. In this instance, a leader implementing the LCC should propose a virtual solution and discuss the changing work environment now and build a case for the role leaders play in maintaining stability amidst a time of chaos.
Internal Factors

In addition to considering external factors, the organization must consider internal factors. Most commonly, these pressures relate to resources (Berlan, 2018). Specifically, the LCC will require financial, time, and human capital investment. Table 6 outlines the potential financial investments.

Table 6

Potential Financial Investment for LCC Solution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LCC Step</th>
<th>Resources Needed</th>
<th>Financial Implications (Annual Costs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1. Create Organization’s Leadership Culture Code</td>
<td>Survey Software (e.g., Survey Monkey)</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2. Communicate the Leadership Culture Code to Stakeholders</td>
<td>Video Conferencing Software (e.g., Zoom) Signage</td>
<td>$2,400 $2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3. Train the Organization on Leadership Culture Code</td>
<td>Instructional Design Software (e.g., Articulate 360)</td>
<td>$2,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4. Hold Leaders Accountable to Leadership Culture Code</td>
<td>Performance Management Module of Payroll/HR System (e.g., Paylocity)</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Financial Cost</td>
<td></td>
<td>$18,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Costs are estimated for a small to medium size organization.

The costs listed above assume the organization does not have some of the technology (e.g., video conferencing software) that many organizations already have. Additionally, the costs include adding a performance management “module” to a payroll/human resource system. This module, which is already available in many systems, allows for tracking of performance within a system. Specifically, this system
would help with a centralized area for leadership evaluations, documentation of 360-meetings, and manage complaints. This system is not necessary for implementation; however, it would provide organization and documentation. Additionally, the costs above do not include the potential costs associated with hiring consultants or subject matter experts. A leader would need to consider the costs associated with external personnel resources if needed for implementation.

As seen in Table 6, the actual financial investments needed to implement the LCC are not great. Where the investment is more substantial is in the human capital arena. Specifically, the LCC will involve the entire organization in some fashion. Senior leaders will need to dedicate time to developing the LCC. Marketing teams will need to dedicate time to creating a communication plan. Training teams, or individuals qualified to create training in leadership, would need to dedicate substantial time to building out each of these trainings. Additionally, all employees will need to dedicate the time needed to complete all of the required trainings. Last, time will be needed from everyone in the organization to hold leaders accountable. In other words, the LCC required a time commitment from everyone in the organization.

To overcome the time commitment barrier, a leader implementing the LCC solution would need to be prepared to talk about the costs associated with toxic leadership. Specifically, the leader will need to use the data presented in this dissertation in practice study to discuss the organizational and personal harms associated with toxic leadership. More precisely, the leader should cite the studies in the Organizational Performance section in Chapter Two to demonstrate how the minimal financial investment and more involved time investment could, in turn, save money and time in the
future. Correctly, the financial and time costs associated with turnover, counterproductive workplace behavior, and lack of innovation should be used as reasons for the investment. Last, the leader should discuss why preventing toxic leadership is needed to protect employees from negative influences while reporting to the leader and, as seen in this study, after not reporting to the leader.

**Social-Relational Factors**

A leader should not only consider the external and internal factors for implementation; they also must consider the relational factors. Social-relational factors refer to how relationships and culture can influence the success of the plan (Berlan, 2018). Thus, a leader should consider the relationships within the organization and how these could influence implementing the Leadership Culture Code (LCC).

The LCC will require a relational change between leaders and followers, which, more than likely, will change the culture at the organization. Thus, the leader should be prepared to manage change within an organization. One model to assist the leader is the Kotter 8-Step Change Model. Kotter's (2020) model presents eight specific steps leaders can take to institute change within an organization. This plan includes building urgency, creating a coalition, sharing vision, enlisting supporters, removing barriers to incite action, creating short-term wins, sustaining progress, and institutionalizing the change. This model, or another change process model, should be considered by the leader. A leader who chooses to implement the LCC solution should thoughtfully create a change management process to guide the cultural change within the organization. To be successful, there must be institutional buy-in; thus, change management must be considered in the implementation plan.
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Timeline for Implementation of the Solution

Once all considerations have been explored, the leader should develop a timeline. This timeline should include key milestones and appropriate dates. A timeline, assuming an early 2021 start, is provided below in Table 7. An organization should plan for approximately an eight-month timeline to complete the implementation.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Milestones</th>
<th>Step of LCC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2021</td>
<td>Introduce LCC, present findings from this dissertation study to decision-makers.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2021</td>
<td>Secure approval for LCC implementation; purchase all software needed for implementation.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2021</td>
<td>Survey organization for leadership assessment and beliefs.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2021</td>
<td>Compare the results of the survey to positive leadership models and organizational results and needs.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2021</td>
<td>Create the first draft of LCC.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2021</td>
<td>Gain feedback on the first draft, incorporate feedback, and finalize LCC.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2021</td>
<td>The communication plan developed and executed.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March - June 2021</td>
<td>Training developed for LCC (Note: training for the first two modules can begin before LCC is finalized).</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July - August 2021</td>
<td>All employees complete required trainings for LCC (After completed, LCC training will need to be included in the onboarding of all new employees.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2021-on-going</td>
<td>Accountability measures in place.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Times will vary on organization size and resources available.

Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution

Once the organization implements the Leadership Culture Code (LCC), the leader will also need to evaluate its effectiveness. To accomplish this evaluation, employees
could be surveyed approximately two months after the solution’s implementation. This survey could include the same questions the survey did in Step One of the LCC (see *Step One: Create the Leadership Culture Code* section of this chapter). Additionally, the leader could add questions to the survey to assess how employees perceive the LCC (e.g., favorable, not favorable), and ask for feedback through open-ended questions about the effectiveness of the plan. Once the surveys are received, the leader could compare the recent results to the results obtained before the LCC was introduced. This comparison would provide a quantifiable measurement of effectiveness. For example, if 70.00% of respondents rated their leader as excellent after the LCC and only 62.00% did so before, this change would indicate a positive influence of 8.00%. The qualitative feedback could be reviewed for themes to understand the lived experience. This information could be used for improvements in the LCC solution (e.g., more information about holding leaders accountable) or in the development of additional trainings (e.g., having difficult conversations).

Another possible way the leader could evaluate the effectiveness of the LCC solution is by using the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) to survey followers. Where this survey would not yield comparable data as the survey mentioned above, it could add data associated explicitly with toxic leadership, which is needed to determine if toxic leadership persists within the organization. Specifically, the leader could have followers complete the TLS for their leader and determine each leader’s composite score. A score below 2.22, as identified by this study’s researcher and discussed in the *Participant Selection* section in Chapter Three, could serve as the maximum allowable score for leaders. If all leaders fell below 2.22, the organization could feel confident toxic
leadership did not exist in the organization; thus, measuring the effectiveness of the LCC solution.

It is crucial to note evaluation of the LCC should not end with either of the proposed surveys. Instead, the organization should continue to seek feedback at regular intervals. This feedback can be used to continually refine the trainings, communication, and accountability aspect of the LCC. In other words, the work of making the LCC successful is not completed once it is implemented. To truly influence change in leadership behaviors, thought, and actions, the LCC must be maintained and revised with time to stay relevant.

**Implications**

**Practical Implications**

Toxic leadership is a wide-spread phenomenon. According to the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2019), over 66% of Americans claim to have worked in a toxic environment. Of those individuals claiming to have worked in a toxic environment, more than half stated their leader was the creator of the toxicity. These statistics, when considered collectively, mean more than one-third of Americans have worked for or are working for a toxic leader. Thus, toxic leadership is prevalent in the United States and is a complex, real-world problem.

Despite being complex, the overarching theme of the current literature suggests that, as a society, toxic leaders inflict harm on their organizations and followers. However, the current literature is extremely scarce about how toxic leaders continue to influence their followers after they no longer report to the leader (Carleton, 2016; Oh & Farh, 2017). The current study attempted to extend this understanding by exploring how
previous toxic leaders continue to influence their past followers’ lives. The findings suggest the toxic leader’s influence does not end after the follower no longer reports to the leader. This finding is valuable information to know when considering the influences of toxic leaders.

The current study could help society change how it views toxic leaders. Too often, organizations consider toxic leaders as “bad bosses” or make exceptions for poor leaders because of the specific results they achieve. But at what cost should these toxic leaders be accepted? Should society accept good results as a valid reason to employ toxic leaders? The current literature illustrates there are organizational and individual costs associated with this acceptance. The current dissertation in practice research study suggests these costs may not end for the followers even after they no longer report to the toxic leader. Specifically, followers of toxic leaders may experience trauma and health ailments that will forever change their life stories. These findings and the proposed solution ask us to think more critically about the role of leaders in our society. And, if we do think more critically, could we incite change to be less accepting of toxic leaders? If we are less accepting and hold leaders more accountable, can we reduce the amount of harm that followers experience? This study has aspirational implications for the greater good. Specifically, the greater good could be positively influenced by being less accepting of toxic leaders and the harms they cause.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study explored the long-term influence of toxic leadership by amplifying the voices of followers who previously reported to a toxic leader. By using a qualitative descriptive design, the study provided detailed understandings about how previous toxic
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Leaders continue to influence followers who no longer report to them. The results of this study suggested that the influence of toxic leaders do not end when the relationship ends. Instead, the findings suggested that past followers continue to be influenced after they no longer work for a toxic leader. Unfortunately, four of the current study’s findings were negative. The results of this study provided information about the long-term influence that was not previously known. However, the researcher argues that much more research is needed to understand these influences more fully. The findings in this study can inspire more studies in this scarcely researched area.

As a first step, researchers could conduct similar studies with more diverse participants. As discussed in the Limitations section of Chapter Four, the study’s participants were all highly educated. Additionally, the majority of the study’s participants were White females who worked in education-related or service-related fields. This study could be modified to include selection criteria based on gender identity, ethnicity, the field of employment, and education level. The findings of such a study could be compared with this study’s findings to see if themes persist.

Secondly, future researchers could employ a phenomenological research design to employ a greater depth of interpretation of the results. Specifically, the researcher selected a qualitative descriptive study because the researcher did not know, due to the lack of research, what framework they could effectively rely on to interpret the data collected. With the knowledge of this study, a future researcher could conduct a phenomenological or other study (e.g., quantitative) and use an abuse or trauma framework to interpret the data collected. This study’s participants compared the
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experience of reporting to a toxic leader to abuse and trauma; thus, these frameworks could be appropriate for interpreting results more deeply.

Thirdly, researchers could use a grounded theory design to study the process followers’ go through after no longer reporting to a toxic leader. Specifically, such a study could explore the steps followers use to “heal” from their experience of reporting to a toxic leader. Many times, during this study, the researcher wondered if followers utilized a process when deciding to leave and, in turn, start to recover from the experience. A grounded theory approach could answer some of these questions.

Another potential study could explore the types of current leaders who are the most effective at helping followers rebound after reporting to a toxic leader. Are servant leaders, transformational leaders, or authentic leaders more adept at mitigating the long-term influences of toxic leaders? Could this information, in turn, help us train current leaders to be more effective when supporting employees?

Lastly, this study purposefully selected participants who reported to toxic leaders in the past versus now. The researcher cannot help but wonder what the influences of a previous toxic leader are on followers who still report to a toxic leader or if a follower’s previous toxic leader(s) influence their perceptions of a current toxic leader. Future studies could explore how this past experience can influence current perceptions of leaders.

**Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

As discussed in the *Practical Implications* section, this dissertation in practice research study directly relates to leadership theory and practice. A collective agreement exists that leaders play an essential role in influencing the behaviors, actions, and
attitudes of their followers (Barling, 2014; Fischer et al., 2017), and a leader’s influence may persist after the followers no longer report to the leaders (Fischer et al., 2017; Keith, 2016). Indeed, the findings in the current study suggested a toxic leader’s influence does not end when a follower stops reporting to a toxic leader. Instead, the findings suggested toxic leaders have long-term influences on their followers. Specifically, the past followers of toxic leaders claim the experience of reporting to a toxic leader is deeper than long-term influences. Instead, they proclaimed the experience changed their life stories and them as people. Additionally, participants indicated previous toxic leaders influenced their current work lives, leadership, self-confidence, ability to trust, and appreciation for their current work environment. These findings extended our understanding of toxic leadership and how toxic leadership lingers with followers. These findings aligned with the belief that the influence of leaders persist and, as a result, extended our understanding by providing specific examples of how the influences persist. When one considers their potential long-term influence on followers, the responsibility of leaders and leadership changes.

**Summary of the Dissertation in Practice**

Toxic leaders are leaders who typically exhibit dysfunctional personal characteristics and often engage in damaging behaviors (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b). Additionally, toxic leaders are more concerned with power, prestige, and their image than doing what is right for others or an organization (Burns, 2017; Padilla et al., 2007). Unfortunately, toxic leaders occupy leadership positions across all sectors in the U.S. (Brooks, 2017; Templer, 2018). The current understanding of toxic leadership suggests toxic leaders have a significant negative influence on their organizations and followers.
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(Tepper et al., 2017; Weberg & Fuller, 2019). The current research centers around the negative influences of toxic leaders when followers report to them. Scarce research is available to explore the long-term influences of toxic leaders.

The current qualitative descriptive study attempted to explore the long-term influences of toxic leaders by listening to participants who described how prior toxic leaders continue to influence them. The researcher interviewed 17 individuals. By listening to each participant’s lived experience, the researcher formed six categories and 10 subcategories to answer the research question, “How do toxic leaders influence followers who no longer report to them?” The categories that emerged from this qualitative descriptive study included: (1) changing followers as people, (2) current work lives, (3) leadership, (4) self-confidence, (5) ability to trust, and (6) appreciation for current work situation.

From the information collected, the researcher proposed a practical solution to help prevent toxic leaders’ influences in the future. Specifically, the researcher proposed a Leadership Culture Code (LCC) solution. An aspirational goal of the LCC was to help prevent toxic leadership within an organization by explicitly stating leadership expectations for its leaders and holding leaders accountable for those standards. The LCC aims to accomplish its goal by empowering followers by training them on toxic leadership and LCC expectations and providing them more avenues to report toxic leadership behaviors. To accomplish this, the LCC asks organizations to establish ways to identify toxic leadership within an organization. One of the main ways an organization can accomplish this identification is by amplifying the voices of the followers, which aligns precisely with the goal of this qualitative descriptive study: amplifying the voices
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of individuals who previously reported to toxic leaders. To change leadership and our acceptance of toxic leaders, should we not listen to those who report to toxic leaders? If we do listen, our tolerance for toxic leadership should change.
References


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Lian, H., Ferris, D. L., Morrison, R., & Brown, D. J. (2014). Blame it on the supervisor or the subordinate? Reciprocal relations between abusive supervision and
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https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035498


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Pishgooie, A. H., Atashzadeh-Shoorideh, F., Falcó-Pegueroles, A., & Lotfi, Z. (2019). Correlation between nursing managers' leadership styles and nurses' job stress and
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https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.12707


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TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES


https://doi.org/10.1007/s00420-018-1312-9


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## Appendix A

Overview of Toxic Leadership Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Key Components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whicker’s definition and description</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Introduced the term “toxic leader.” Defined toxic leaders are defined in six “mals”: maladjusted, malcontent, malfunctional, malevolent, malicious, and engage in malfeasances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military’s definition (Reed)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Offered the military’s first definition of toxic leadership. Toxic leaders were defined as leaders who lacked concern for the well-being of others, displayed interpersonal behaviors that negatively impacted the climate, and were motivated primarily by their self-interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipman-Blumen’s conceptual framework</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Provided a framework to define toxic leaders through a range of behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Padilla et al.’s conceptual framework</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Introduced the idea toxic leaders are only part of the program; followers and environments also play a role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Leaders: Are charismatic, have a personalized need for power, narcissistic, and have negative life themes and ideology of hate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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- Followers: Two groups of followers were identified. Colluders are followers who enroll in a toxic leader’s vision to better their position. Conformers do little to stop because they “go along” with the toxic leader out of fear or ease.

- Environments: Certain environments foster toxicity. These environments lack checks and balances, are unstable, have high perceptions of threat, and lack values.

Schmidt 2008 Empirical Developed an empirical scale to measure toxic leadership (perceptions of toxic leadership behaviors). Identified five dimensions: abusive supervision, authoritarianism, narcissism, unpredictability, and self-promotion.

Pelletier 2010 Conceptual Pelletier espoused the following as the eight commonly accepted dimensions of toxic leadership: attacks on follower's self-esteem, lacking integrity, abusiveness, social exclusion, divisiveness, promoting inequity, threatening security, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors.
## Appendix B

Summary of the Toxic Leadership Scale’s Five Dimensions (Schmidt, 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Behaviors Associated with Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **First Dimension:** Abusive Supervision | - Ridicules subordinates and tells subordinates they are incompetent.  
- Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions.  
- Is not considerate about subordinates’ commitments outside of work.  
- Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace.  
- Publicly belittles and reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures. |
| **Second Dimension:** Authoritarianism | - Controls how subordinates complete tasks; doesn’t permit original approaches.  
- Invades the privacy of subordinates.  
- Will ignore ideas that are contrary to their own.  
- Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in extraordinary circumstances. |
| **Third Dimension:** Narcissism | - Determine all decisions in the unit, whether they are important or not.  
- Assumes that they are destined to enter highest ranks of the organization.  
- Thinks that they are more capable than others.  
- Thrives on compliments and personal accolades.  
- Has a sense of personal entitlement and believes they are an extraordinary person. |
| **Fourth Dimension:** Self-Promotion | - Drastically changes their demeanor when their supervisor is present.  
- Denies responsibility for mistakes made in their unit.  
- Will only help people who can help them get ahead.  
- Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to them.  
- Acts only in the best interest of their next promotion. |
| **Fifth Dimension:** Unpredictability | - Has explosive outbursts that affect the emotions of subordinates.  
- Allows their current mood to affect vocal tone and workplace climate.  
- Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons.  
- Varies in the degree of approachability, causing subordinates to “read” their mind. |
Appendix C

Example Social Media Recruitment Post

**Research Study Participation Opportunity:** I am seeking participants for my dissertation in practice research study about the long-term influences of toxic leaders. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experience of reporting to a toxic leader continues to influence followers after they no longer report to a toxic leader.

If you believe you have previously reported to a toxic leader and would be willing to share your experiences and thoughts by participating in this study, please complete the link below

[https://blueq.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3DDsSsthyzYAiCF](https://blueq.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3DDsSsthyzYAiCF)

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I look forward to learning from you!
Appendix D

Study Participant Interest Form

Interest Form: Long-Term Influence of Toxic Leadership Dissertation Research Study

Thank you for your interest in participating in a dissertation in practice research study about the long-term influence of toxic leaders on their followers. The purpose of this study is to learn about how toxic leaders influence their followers after they no longer report to the toxic leader. To learn about these long-term influences, I am seeking to interview individuals who previously reported to a toxic leader.

Participants of the study should expect to spend approximately 30 minutes completing a survey, an hour being interviewed in a virtual setting, and approximately 30 minutes reviewing interview transcripts. Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary, and participants can withdraw anytime. All information will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please provide your information below. After receiving this interest form, you will receive an informed consent form, which will provide you more information about this study and a questionnaire to complete regarding your past toxic leader and current leader.

Thank you for your interest and for supporting my dissertation in practice research study,
Stephanie Hinshaw
Doctoral Candidate
Creighton University

Q1 Please provide your email address

Q2 Please provide your phone number
Creighton University Research Informed Consent

June 26, 2020

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate at Creighton University, researching under the supervision of my Chair, Dr. Rob Koonce. My dissertation research centers around the long-term influences of toxic leaders on their followers after they no longer report to the toxic leader. Participation in this study is voluntary, and if you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

I am asking you to participate in this study because you indicated that you have previously reported to a toxic leader. Additionally, you expressed an interest in this study by completing a study interest form. The next step in participant selection is reviewing this form and completing a questionnaire. From this questionnaire, I will select approximately 10-25 individuals to participate in virtual interviews. Participants should expect to spend approximately 30 minutes completing the survey and potentially 60 minutes being interviewed. If interviewed, participants will also be asked to review their interview transcript (approximately 30 minutes) for accuracy. Thus, participation in this study requires a time commitment from you of approximately 2 hours if selected for an interview.

It is important to know there is no financial compensation for your time or involvement in this study. Thus, there are minimal personal benefits for participating in this study. The benefits instead center on helping advance our understanding of toxic leaders. Specifically, you would be helping me, and as a result, future researchers better understand how the experience of reporting to a toxic leader continues to influence individuals after they no longer report to the toxic leader. Presently, the research in this area is scarce. By participating in this study, you will help advance our understanding of toxic leaders and their influence on followers.

The potential risks of this study are minimal. Specifically, no more risk is expected than what is encountered every day in life. As you will be asked to reflect on the experience of reporting to a toxic leader, it is possible you could experience some emotional stress. If you should do so, you can get assistance at https://www.mentalhealth.gov.

Another possible risk of this study is the accidental disclosure of confidential information from the data collected throughout the study. Methods of storing and securing data are designed to minimize this risk. I will do everything I can to keep your records confidential. Precisely, I will remove names and other identifiable information (i.e., organization names) from all data collected. This information will be maintained and stored in a password-protected personal cloud drive. Additionally, I will not include any
names in any written reports associated with this study. All these steps are designed to keep your participation in this study confidential.

If you have any questions about this research, you are welcome to contact me directly. I can be reached at (614)-551-5482. Additionally, if you have any questions about research participants’ rights, you can contact Creighton University’s Institutional Review Board at (402)-280-2126.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Hinshaw, Doctoral Candidate
Principal Investigator

Bill of Rights for Research Participants
As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.

2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.

3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.

4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.

5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.

6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.

7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.

8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research participant.

9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
   a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
   b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.
Q1 Please think about the leader whom you identified as toxic. For each behavior noted below, please rate this leader using the following scale (with possible responses for each behavior ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drastically changes their demeanor when their supervisor is present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Has explosive outbursts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Controls how subordinates complete their tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tells subordinates they are incompetent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has a sense of personal entitlement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thrives on compliments and personal accolades</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acts only in the best interest of their next promotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is inflexible when it comes to organizational</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policies, even in special circumstances</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ridicules subordinates</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invades the privacy of subordinates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinks that they are more capable than others</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will only offer assistance to people who can help them get ahead</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publicly belittles subordinates</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Slightly Disagree</td>
<td>Slightly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Varies in their degree of approachability</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to them</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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### Q2 Please think about your current leader. For each behavior noted below, please rate this leader using the following scale (with possible responses for each behavior ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

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<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
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<th>Agree</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons</td>
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<td>Will ignore ideas that are contrary to their own</td>
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### TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td>when their supervisor is present</td>
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<td>Has explosive outbursts</td>
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<td>Controls how subordinates complete their tasks</td>
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<td>Tells subordinates they are incompetent</td>
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<td>Has a sense of personal entitlement</td>
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<td>Thrives on compliments and personal accolades</td>
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<td>Acts only in the best interest of their next promotion</td>
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<td>Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in special circumstances</td>
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<td>Ridicules subordinates</td>
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<td>Reminds subordinates of their past</td>
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|TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

- **Invades the privacy of subordinates**
- **Thinks that they are more capable than others**
- **Will only offer assistance to people who can help them get ahead**
- **Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned**
- **Publicly belittles subordinates**
- **Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not**
- **Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace**
- **Varies in their degree of approachability**
- **Does not permit**
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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<th>Slightly Agree</th>
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<tr>
<td>subordinates to approach goals in new ways</td>
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<td>Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to them</td>
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<td>Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job</td>
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*Note: The researcher attempted to contact Schmidt to ask for permission to use the TLS.*
Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Introduction
Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I look forward to learning from you, and thank you for sharing your wisdom. I do want to remind you of the purpose of this interview quickly. I am researching the influences of toxic leaders on their followers after the follower no longer reports to the leader. This is a scarcely researched topic presently; thus, your participation in this study will help advance the understanding of the long-term influences of toxic leaders. I also want to acknowledge the questionnaire you completed before this interview. This questionnaire asked you to think about behaviors associated with your toxic leader. For this interview, I am going to ask you not to focus on those behaviors and actions. Instead, I want us to focus more on you and your experience.

I want to remind you that your comments will remain confidential. The interview today will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be recorded for transcription. You will receive a copy of the interview transcript to review for accuracy 1-2 weeks after this interview. So, if you do not have any questions now (pause to confirm they do not), then I will go ahead and get started.

Background Questions:
1. Where do you work now, and how long have you been in this position?

2. How does your current position and employment situation differ from that of when you reported to a toxic leader?

3. In your questionnaire, you indicated you no longer report to the toxic leader you used as your point of reference. Please share with me what happened that led you to not report to this individual anymore.

4. Thank you for sharing. When did the (restate event from above) occur? And how did you feel when (event) happened? How long did that feeling last?

Phenomenon/Interview Questions (Note: not all questions may be needed based on answers.)
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

1. How would you describe the term *leadership*? Does what you just described differ from how you would describe the toxic leader to whom you previously reported? If so, in what ways?

2. What aspects of your current position or responsibilities you feel are more influenced by your experience of reporting to a toxic leader? Why do you believe that is? (i.e., giving presentations, etc.)

3. How prevalent is your toxic leader’s influence in your work life? (i.e., every day, every so often, during certain events or time periods?)

4. Describe how your experience of reporting to a toxic leader influences the relationships that you have with your current leader.

5. Describe how your experience of reporting to a toxic leader influences the relationships that you have with your co-workers.

6. How do you think your experience working for a toxic leader has changed you?

7. If there is something more you would like to add about this experience that I have not asked, would you share that with me now?

Prompts/Follow-Up Questions

- Would you expound on that?
- How would you describe that differently?
- I would like to hear more about that; please tell me more.
- That is interesting; can you please explain this more for me?
- How exactly did you feel at this time?
- Would you mind being a bit more specific, so I can better understand the experience?
How so? (Or in what ways?)

Closing
Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your experience with me today. I greatly appreciate your openness and honesty. I will be working on transcribing this interview in the next two weeks. I will send you the transcript at this time to review to ensure the appropriateness of the transcription. I do not suspect I will need to schedule another interview at this time; however, I would like to ask you if you would be willing to spend another 15-30 minutes with me if needed. I would, of course, reach out to you to schedule this in advance. (Wait for confirmation). Thank you very much for your willingness to assist. After all the interviews are conducted, I will work on analyzing the data and completing my dissertation. If you are interested, I would be happy to share the findings with you (wait for confirmation). Great. Thank you again for your time today. I wish you a great day.

Rescheduling Interviews
The researcher’s goal is to complete the interview during one 45-60 minute session. However, the researcher will schedule an additional session to complete the interview if a participant should need to end the session early for any reason (e.g., becoming distraught thinking about their toxic leader, personal or professional circumstances, or technology challenges.)
Appendix H

Demographic Information Survey

Thank you for participating in the Long-Term Influences of Toxic Leadership Research Study. Please provide some background information for consideration in the study.

**Gender**
- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to answer

**Ethnicity**
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American or American Indian
- White
- Other

**Age**
- Under 25
- 25 - 35
- 36 - 45
- 46 - 55
- 56 - 65
- Over 65

**Educational Background (Please select the highest level completed)**
- High School
- Some College - No Degree
- Associate or Technical Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate Degree
DATE: 24-Jun-2020
TO: Hinshaw, Stephanie
FROM: Social / Behavioral IRB Board
PROJECT TITLE: The Long-term Influences of Toxic Leaders on Their Followers: A Qualitative Descriptive Study
REFERENCE #: 2001147-01
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
REVIEW TYPE: Exempt
ACTION: APPROVED
EFFECTIVE DATE: 24-Jun-2020

Thank you for your Initial Application submission materials for this project. The following items were reviewed with this submission:

- Creighton University HS eForm~
  - Interview Protocol
  - Toxic Leadership Scale Questionnaire (for participant selection)
  - Informed Consent
  - Participant Recruitment Message and Interest Form
  - Hinshaw Study Overview

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or irb@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and number in all correspondence with this committee.
Thank you for your Modification submission materials for this project. The following item(s) were reviewed in this submission:

- Creighton University HS eForm
  - Hinshaw Study Overview
  - Participant Recruitment Message and Interest Form
  - Interview Protocol
  - Toxic Leadership Scale Questionnaire (for participant selection)
  - Informed Consent
  - Demographic Questions
- Request for Modification

This Modification will involve the following change: In addition to the two primary tools, the researcher will use a simple demographic information collection survey to collect demographic information about participants. The researcher will collect the following information: gender, ethnicity, age, and education level.

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2 and the revision(s) you have made do not change that determination. Therefore, the modification is approved.

All protocol modifications and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the ‘Request for Modification’ form when submitting changes. You must track all changes in the documents affected by the Modification so that the Board can appropriately review and approve the submission.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or irb@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and number in all correspondence with this Board.
Categories and Subcategories to answer: “How do Toxic Leaders Influence Followers Who no Longer Report to them?”

1) **Category 1: Toxic Leaders Influence Past Followers by Changing them as People**

Not seen as reporting to a bad boss in the past. Instead, perceived as something that changed them as a person.

*I would say that, again, it changes you as a person. It's a very big statement to say it changes [you] as a person, but really it does. It changes you as a person because, in some cases, it can make you more cynical. In some cases, it can make you wonder more. In other cases, it can change the way you lead going into the next position. I would just say it really changes you as a person.* (Participant 1010)

*It continues because it really does shape your life. And I'm coming from a place where I was in it for such a long period of time. And relatively at the beginning of my career, too, so it really did have a deep impact on what my life as a [position] looked like, what it looks like.* (Participant 1366)

*I think it's really critical to realize that when you're in it, you don't always understand, you don't always see the full picture, just like everything else. Whether you're on a toxic marriage, a toxic relationship, working for a toxic boss, in a toxic environment, it becomes pervasive, it becomes more than the boss, the manager.* (Participant 1509)

*But did it have a lasting effect on me? Yes. Does it still continue to influence me? Yes. Those things don't go away. You have your pain, and you can either let your pain define you, or you can use your pain and recognize that it's part of you and work with it. While I may not experience the physical and mental pains and hardships of what I had, it's still there; it's part of me. It's now something that I can draw on and use... If you focus on it, then it continues to stick with you, and it can permanently damage you, whether that's your career or mentally or emotionally. A toxic leader doesn't just affect an individual's work. It affects the individual, the whole person. Their outlook on who they are and on what they do, and on how they do it. It doesn't end when the workday does. You carry it with you.* (Participant 1798)

*But know that when you're a toxic leader, you're damaging someone as a person, not just their future employment, but you can be damaging them as a person* (Participant 6007)
Let's just put it that way. I couldn't even see myself in a very positive light. I couldn't see what the qualities were. I had a hard time when I was working with the therapist about finding who I was because I didn't know who I was anymore. I was a manipulated little person that took it. (Participant 1010)

a. Subcategory 1.a: Health Implications that are Forever Part of the Story
Suffered health and mental ailments that cannot be erased in their history.

There are health implications that are both psychological and physical that occur because of working in an environment with a toxic leader. And it's... Can those things be remedied after you leave, after you're no longer living and working in that arena? Absolutely, however, it becomes part of your story, right? Is that experience and the implications of those. Whether that's going on antidepressants, taking anxiety medication, having to... physical symptoms that come through stress in your body. (Participant 1366)

From there, it led to me wanting to go back and talk to a doctor, talk to a psychologist, psychiatrist, medication, all that stuff. If you have to be medicated to perform your job, that's a sign. Some of us have to be medicated for long-term health needs, but if you need something specifically to help you cope with your job, that should be a big sign. That's where I was. They took a couple of months to work through with health professionals how to divorce me from this person's actions. (Participant 1798)

Physical decline in health, I was just sick all the time, and I kept writing it off as something else. So, there's a true physical toll to that level of stress... So, there were a lot of like physical ailments and stuff, like I was routinely sick like I had a cold all the time, I had a reoccurrence of migraines that I get quite a bit. Just there were skin issues that cleared up after I stopped working there. There were just all these like real, physical, tangible things that as the stress sort of purged itself from my body, I realized had to be interrelated to what was going on. And so, I think I was just so dead set on not letting it get to me that I was in denial that she really was. (Participant 1109)

My doctor, she's like, "Do I need to be concerned about you?" or anything like that. I said, "I just want to sleep. I haven't slept in three weeks. I just want to close my eyes and sleep for a week." The next thing I know, they called the ambulance and sent me to the hospital. The hospital tried to... They said you can either choose to Baker Act or we're going to Baker Act you. I'm like, "I'm not going to kill myself or anything like that. I want to sleep, and I haven't slept." The next thing I know, I'm in a psych ward for a week. (Participant 1010)
But when you work, it causes stress, which we know has physiological impacts on the body. There are also those impacts that have not resolved yet; hopefully, they're just going to take time. Hopefully, that's not embedded in me for the rest of my work life. But definitely, you have to work your way out of it. (Participant 1614)

I got ill, and I just couldn't get out of bed. And it's still emotional when I think about that. I had to go on medication. I was really unhealthy mentally because of that toxicity and just the everyday, that pressure and the needing to protect yourself, and trying to figure out who can I engage with in relationships, and how to navigate that space, because nothing really was, there wasn't a productive, consistent way to do that. (Participant 1366)

Full transparency to an academic researcher, I actually had taken a break mental health break. I actually filled out the FAFSA, not the FAFSA the-FMLA, and took a little bit of a leave because I couldn't handle it. Eventually, [I] came back, but it really didn't improve. There was some attempt, I think, and I just had gotten to the point where I was just burnt out and done. (Participant 1798)

I lost a ton of weight during my last year there. And people were concerned because I was just on pins and needles. And yeah, it was very difficult. (Participant 5005)

I wanted to leave, and honestly, the main reason that I left is because of my relationship with the owner of the school, and that was very sad to me that she could control that in my life. So I started...my health declined, I had pneumonia twice while I was working there, which I never had before, I started getting bronchitis every year, I gained weight, I would hear things when I came home from work, it was almost like I was carrying a backpack on my shoulders and I couldn't release it. (Participant 1244)

b. Subcategory 1.b: Perceived as a Trauma/Traumatic Experience
The pain caused by the toxic leader is perceived as trauma that never fully heals.

There's a long-lasting, emotional part of this I don't think anybody can completely eliminate. You can let it not define you, but it's still there. A toxic leader builds a traumatic experience in a person's life. Like all trauma, it never completely goes away; it's still there. (Participant 1798)
I would say, anybody that's gone through, I would call it trauma, I mean, that was a traumatic experience for me. I will never forget it. I mean, I almost started to get... almost cry, when I first started to talk to you about... even though this happened a long time ago, like it was a horrible, horrible experience to go through. And I, to this day, again, still can see him coming over the table at me. I will never forget that experience. And it was one of the worst days ever of my career. (Participant 5005)

She said some awful, just awful things, terrible things that still essentially, in many ways, haunt me to this day. (Participant 4004)

Because honestly, [researcher], it's almost been like a PTSD situation for me literally, to the point where I felt like I just didn't know if I was going to get through it. Anyhow, I'm on the other end of it, so it's kind of hard to go back there because things had been so good for so long... And there's still obviously some tough feelings that I'm experiencing. I've been pretty good at kind of blocking it out for a while, getting perspective, not wanting to engage in a lot of it, just because it's been kind of a painful process. (Participant 1509)

That anxiety is still there with me after a year. It's hard to see her name to see her. (Participant 8008)

I still have dreams and nightmares about that job and working there. Dreams that I've gone back to it, and I'm in a different role. I had those dreams a couple of months ago, just recently as a couple of months ago. (Participant 1614)

I think there's emotional triggers as a key piece. I can't hear the word [toxic leader's name] without cringing. Whenever I hear about [prior university] I would say I would say I was a [school mascot] fan, and now whenever I think of [prior university], I associate [prior university] with [toxic leader] even though they had nothing to do with each other, and nobody over there knew what was going on. So those emotional triggers are still pretty big, and not only did they impact me from a work perspective, but my family had to see me go through some very horrible times. To understand what he did to me at work and his behavior at work and how it changed me as a person and how my family saw me, it really was a very humbling experience because my family was used to me being the strong person, and they all had to be strong for me. (Participant 1010)

It's okay to cry; I just don't want to... It's very frustrating to me to think that people could have little to no regard in that respect for the words that they say to other people. Especially in an environment like that. (Participant 2002)
We've covered everything because we've covered the emotional aspect of it... but I think that they're good questions because they prompt you to really delineate some of these elements that, like I said, you don't really think about until you're out of it and you are like, "What did I just go through?" (Participant 7007)

So last Friday, I went back up to my former job, and I had T-shirts and shirts from the school that were barely worn that I wanted teachers that needed them to have them, that would like to have an extra set or whatever. So I went up there, and when I walked in, I was so happy to see my two friends that were in the office and I had a couple of teachers come down the hall and hug me and say how much they missed me and all that kind of thing, but I had such a bad feeling when I was in there like I just wanted to get out. I hadn't felt that before. (Participant 1244)

That a toxic leader can stay. This is what I would want people to know. A toxic leader can stay with you long after they've left. They could be long removed from a job. You could be long separated from them, but it still can harp on you years later. (Participant 1887)

I think it lingers, right? You're worried, you've worked for someone that's been... It's like abuse almost. And that's a really, really bold and brazen statement, but I said it in the depths of working with the [former organization] my co-workers said it while I was there. I feel like I'm in an abusive relationship. I'm afraid to leave. I want to leave, but I can't. I'm afraid. (Participant 1614)

c. **Subcategory 1.c: Stunted Career Growth**
Did not grow professionally for a period of time because of toxic leader.

It was deeply sad for me because I feel like my whole career has been stunted. And you can't get that back. You can't change those 10 years of not being able to do this thing, this initiative or that initiative, and that's deeply sad on a multitude of levels. (Participant 1366)

But so I used to tell people that I had almost felt betrayed in a sense by this promise of having a full-time job. I felt like it was something that I had worked so long for, and I finally got it, and all these things were supposed to be amazing, and all fall into place, and everything was going to be great, and then it wasn't. And I didn't want to go to work, and I didn't... and then after a while, I didn't even want to try to fit in anymore. (Participant 9009)

Because of all of the very personal and personality attacks, I felt a lot like something was wrong with me as a person and that I'm a deeply flawed
human, being beyond concepts of original sin, like the whole thing, but that I am really, really flawed, and that I don't deserve to work to have professional advancement, to have good positions, to have good pay. It was shaping the kinds of positions that I went after. (Participant 6007)

A toxic leader inhibits followers from their best potential. Yeah, I never... I would have...well, I would never say... I never say never, but had I still reported to her, I wouldn't be where I am today, hands down. I would not be. (Participant 4004)

I did end up taking a job that most people would say would be a step back in a career, but I was at the point where I kind of needed a job, I needed some money. (Participant 1798)

I had it going in my brain; I was like, "Ah, by February or March, I'll be rocking and rolling, and we'll do this." But it wasn't. I mean, it was another year and a half before I was full-time at [current organization]. (Participant 3003)

Because for a number of reasons, I have a really narrow job pool. I mean, there's not a lot of [positions] in the [field], just in general....and I just basically had to wait. And there are only 36 people in my agency, so they do not have openings very often, so I just had to wait for an opening for my job and at the level that I'm currently at. (Participant 1023)

2) **Category 2: Previous Toxic Leaders Influence Their Followers Current Work Lives**

Past experience of a toxic leader continues to influence current work lives and routines.

So, I've told my new boss probably three times, to quote myself, "We're going to have to de-program me," because things in my new job are so much just easier and less complicated. (Participant 1023)

It's the daily the practice of work. It's having to restructure how I do that. Not, the tasks are all still the same, but the engagement with the colleagues and the boss, I think. (Participant 1366)

But I absolutely have side effects from working in a toxic environment; it has absolutely changed me and makes me react certain ways that I probably wouldn't have, had I never been in that environment before. It's changed my relationships with people, certain conversations happen, and it's created a fear reactor. (Participant 1614)
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

a. **Subcategory 2.a: Influences Emotions and Thoughts**
The previous toxic leader still causes emotional reactions.

So there's been instances like that have happened to me. I think I wrote about it in my little survey, but the super boss, as my [partner] calls him, we were on a call the other day, not the other day, but it was a month ago, whatever. He said something like, how's my most nervous co-worker? And I was like, what? He's like I probably shouldn't have said that. I'm really sorry. But you kind of are, you're like a little anxiety ball sometimes. And I'm like, I know. Honestly, I think it's from my last job. (Participant 1614)

Whenever something comes up, I have to check what I am bringing to this that isn't really here... it is really that checking like, "Okay, how much of that is coming from trauma that you've experienced rather than what the actual situation is?" (Participant 6007)

That's where I think his impact has hit me the most. I'm not afraid of getting written up. I think it's afraid of disappointing my supervisor because number one, I'm grateful that they brought me on when I was in such a horrible emotional place with my ego, and my capabilities were just consistently in question. (Participant 1010)

I also worry about how she, my new boss, or other coworkers, will perceive me because my old boss would write me up for a lot of things, little things, like sarcastic responses in a meeting, and I would get an informal writeup that I was not being appropriate. So much irony there we don't need to go into, so I'm constantly still worried that I'm going to say something wrong or do something wrong, and I know that that's not the case, but I haven't been able to dissolve that filter that has built up over five years. (Participant 1023)

Like if he wants to tell me something that maybe I shouldn't know or that isn't a hundred percent yet, but he wants to give me a heads up, something like that. He used to just send me a text that said, "can you come see me?" Or "Make an appointment, have..." his secretary make us an appointment so we can talk." Or those types of things. And after the fourth time, and every time, even though it wasn't a big deal, like when we did finally talk, he's like, "Oh hey, we might be getting some new computers and do you want one?" Like those types of things. It wasn't even...That's not what I thought this was. Okay, because I thought this whole weekend that I was being fired, so thanks. And so I finally was just like, "I can't [deal] with this anymore. It has to be really important when you say, "can you come see me in my office." (Participant 9009)
I think when I first started at the CURRENT ORGANIZATION, where I work now, I had a lot of nervousness about work, and I still do. Especially when we first went home for COVID, everyone's in their own stuff, right? You're trying to work from home, almost all of us on the team have children that are young, including my direct supervisor. And the first or second week of COVID, I hadn't heard from her all week, and I swear, I thought I was going to get fired. I was like I'm not doing my job well, I was just...I finally called her and was like, are you mad at me? No, she's like I trust that you're doing your job, you're fine. (Participant 1614)

It can be pretty triggering for me, and there are times where I have to step away from it and just be like, "I can't even right now." (Participant 6007)

b. **Subcategory 2.b: Their Behaviors & Actions**

Toxic leader influences past followers to behave and act in ways not aligned with their current situation.

I definitely think I over-communicate...A toxic leader brings out people's insecurities at an expert level, hence the communication for me, the over-communicating. (Participant 4004)

I just went into [current leader's] office, and I was like, "Just so you know, I'm going to this thing, and [local mayor's] wife will be there," because she's a vendor for my [partner's] firm, and [current leader] is like, "I don't care," and I'm like, "Okay, that stuff used to get me in trouble." (Participant 6007)

We have the third-highest online success rates in the state. We have very, very high standards for teaching, but I also want... I feel like I need him to know all the things that I'm doing all the time and that so he can see that I'm actually doing things. Does that make sense? (Participant 9009)

It's something that I still do. I put everything religiously on my calendar, down to what I'm working on that particular hour, and it's all because of her. It's all because of her. (Participant 4004)

I think it's impacted me later on because, for a few years, it made me a little leery of performance evals. Performance evals shouldn't be stressful. (Participant 1887)

3) **Category 3: Previous Toxic Leaders Influence Followers Leadership**

Past toxic leaders influence followers’ leadership practice and thoughts about leadership.
It did cause me to reflect a lot on how I was supervising [my team members]. I feel like I made some really positive changes in there because I was in a situation where she was telling me how to supervise them when I would have a difficult situation. And to begin with, I was trying to follow what she said and then realizing no, that's not the type of leader that I want to be, so I made some changes there. And I feel like if I have employees or I'm in a situation where I'm a supervisor or leader, I will be very aware, much more aware than I ever was of healthy leadership and doing a lot of reading and studying about how to do it (Participant 8008).

And that's where I think I really learned the kind of leader that I didn't want to be. I'm very much a servant leader, and she wasn't (Participant 4004).

a. Subcategory 3.a: Their Leadership Practice

Past toxic leaders influence how followers act as leaders.

Now I am one of the leaders, so it's kind of my goal is to not be the toxic leader from what I've learned. I've learned what not to do. (Participant 3003)

I'll tell you, one of the driving motivations behind my leadership style is not being like that person. For me, I do try to put people first. You know the saying, if you take care of your people, they take care of you...There are definitely moments in time where, when confronted with something, I know what flashes through my head is this background of what I had experienced. I don't want anyone to go like that. I make sure that I'm doing it differently. (Participant 1798)

She was like, "Well, because I saw that you were cutting in those papers for the student worker. I just wanted to know what that was about." I was like, "Well, nothing. I was just helping her." And she was like, "Okay. Well, you see, leaders don't cut. You needed to be spending any free time that you have on looking up grants or doing programmatic things or whatever." I was just like, "What?" And I think that was one of the first moments that I truly realized that she was self-absorbed, but I was like, "What?" And I'll never forget that. Leaders don't cut. I would never feel so high above doing a menial task. I have to be, as a leader, I have to be boots on the ground with my team too. Of course, we have to do all the upper level, high-level stuff, absolutely. But you also can't be afraid of doing the dirty work because then your team doesn't respect you if you're never helping them, and that's how, in my opinion, that's how ill feelings toward supervisors begin. It's like, "Oh, she's always taking all the credit for all the work that I do, and she never helps us.” That's not who I wanted to be, and that is the prime example that I can give of the leader that I don't want to be. Leaders don't cut. (Participant 4004)
You have to sort of set personal (leadership) goals for yourself and be proactive and just say, instead of saying this naturally or innately happens as I work and grow as a person. No, it really doesn't. That probably allows you to get stuck in the '80s and, and things like that if you're not constantly working at it. So you got to change up your haircut and those things as well, but really that proactive piece is I think vital. (Participant 1109)

To this day, [toxic leader’s name] will still come up about how he treated people and whatnot. And so I think that will always be in the back of my mind is, not that it's ever crossed my mind to be disrespectful or unprofessional to someone that I need to work with, let's say they make a mistake or whatnot. I read the Crucial Conversations, I read those types of books, and I understand the importance of that. But there's no doubt in my mind; I don't think that because of [toxic leader], I'm even more hypersensitive and very cognizant of making sure that never happens. Because I know what it feels like. It happened to me, I know what that's like, and I would never put that on someone else. (Participant 5005)

They're going to lead them. But there are all kinds of ways to do that, right? They can do that by servant leadership. They support their people through that time by being there for them and finding their strengths, and drawing them out. They could be authoritarian and just crack the whip. So there are different ways to do it. (Participant 1614)

I think fundamentally, it made me know what not to do in a lot of cases. Clear signs where even if things get really ugly for some reason like I've had at other positions without toxic leaders, I've had some like toxic subordinates as well, but you just get so frustrated with dealing with. But so I understand some of the warning signs, so I hope that I never get to a place where I even approach being thought of as a toxic leader. But I think it's given me sort of the drive to be more of the leader I picture myself as. So if you asked ten years ago what kind of leader I was or wanted to be and I would have used a lot of this same words about collaboration and learning and things like that, but instead of those just being sort of passive words or an idea of what I'm supposed to be, there's a lot more drive and sort of auditing, like personal auditing that I do to make sure that I align with my own personal journey. And I do think of it as a journey because you have to keep reevaluating even if it's in the same position in the same company. (Participant 1109)

And so I will never forget it, it will always be in my mind. I guess in some respect, I mean, the positive takeaway to the experience that I went through is that I know the importance of how to treat people, and how important that is. And in doing that, in treating people the right way. (Participant 5005)
b. **Subcategory 3.b: General Thoughts about Leadership**

Learned general leadership lessons, such as identifying effective leadership, from their experience.

*It's helped me to compare and contrast what does good leadership looks like. If I want to be a leader, I have a model to emulate if I want to. I have several models to emulate, but it also gives me things I want to practice in what I do, no matter who, whether it's people who report to me or colleagues who are on my level.* (Participant 1887)

*So I think that was the biggest takeaway that I got, was being a leader doesn't mean being the loudest, and being upfront, and being the most vocal. And there are subliminal and smaller things that you do, that get people underneath you to trust you, that you know what you're doing. You don't have to be the biggest and the loudest* (Participant 3003)

*Times are different, and times have changed. How you could lead and what you could get away with prior doesn't cut it anymore. I talked briefly about that executive director that led. Ultimately it was the one who hired, who I would now define as the toxic boss, right out of a 1980s corporate playbook. So funny, not in a good way, though. Just everything about that, her leadership style just was old school, old corporate. That doesn't work anymore.* (Participant 1798)

*So, I have a very different mindset and viewpoint of management versus leadership. And I often think toxic leadership leans into the management category of things.* (Participant 1366)

*And she was so insecure coming in that she didn't show it with integrity. Like when [previous great leader] came in, even with her doctorate, and has worked in leadership, when she first came in, she was one of these inclusive leaders, like "I've worked in higher ed, but I'm new to [previous organization], I'm new to this environment. I'm here for you. Help me learn this environment, for those of you who've been here a long time."

*Under [previous great leader], I personally blossomed. I took on so much more and started a couple of programs. It was a great time until it wasn't. With [toxic leader], it was horrible, because she just came in even worse. She's maybe in her [specific age range] ... But instead of coming in, she came in with a huge chip on her shoulder, and it was just horrible.* (Participant 1509)

*Well, I think one of the things that I can say about leadership is leadership is not pushing people to get where you want them to be. It is about equipping them with all the necessary tools and reasons for excelling in*
their positions and being honest with them, making sure that they have a comfortable work environment if they're not performing up to par, sit down with them early so that you can change behavior before it turns into something that is unproductive or requires disciplinary action.
(Participant 1010)

And it really has bothered me because it puts employees second, or sometimes third, and I always feel like if you put people first, if you really focus on taking care of your people and you make that really overt, that you really care about your people, they will work harder and with more passion and integrity without having to be forced or having to be asked to do that. That's just in my experience. So I'm very [sic] make sure that your priority is people over... people first, always. (Participant 1023)

Well, without not letting me grow, you know what I mean? Because then, he also gives me those opportunities where I have to do the things that I'm not great at, but that would make me better in my position earlier, whereas, in the previous area, I felt like it was all the same. The supervisor, they'd almost have the same reaction to everything, and so will say to you. (Participant 9009)

I would define leadership as, first and foremost, being truthful in everything that you do, being transparent, being inclusive, being kind. I mean, all of those pieces are very important to me. Those elements are key. Then contrasting it to where I was... I mean, there was a lot of this secretiveness that would happen. A lot of meetings behind closed doors. (Participant 7007)

4) **Category 4: Influences on Self-Confidence**

Previous followers of toxic leaders expressed feeling less confident in their judgment, abilities, and feelings.

*My confidence over the last five years has just been going down and down and down, even though everyone that I work with only has really positive, nice things to say* (Participant 1023)

*I have my confident days where I'm feeling really good and so forth. Then usually something will happen, somebody will say, "Stop," or they put some type of hesitation out there for me, and then my confidence drops. Most people it would drop just a little bit. Mine drops drastically.* (Participant 1010)
Sub-Category 4.1: Lack of Trust in their Judgement
Concerned about their ability to judge situations and take appropriate actions.

There's just so much questioning of myself around that as well, and my judge of character, and my judge of leadership, and good leadership and what that is. So I think it's going to take a long time to get over that part of it. (Participant 8008)

There's that emotional piece that still lingers. You're right; I am very reflective, sometimes too much because there for a long time at the beginning, I just couldn't figure out what I did wrong to continue to allow him to be that way. One of the biggest questions I still ask myself is, why did I not stop it earlier? (Participant 1010)

Like, I just wanted to kick myself. It's sort of like the first time I knew it was a bad situation and it didn't last as long. I was lucky enough that the institution did deal with that leader. But it's sort of like fool-me-once scenario like, I was in this again, and I still kept fighting and still kept denying that it was a problem. And so I just, I was very mad at myself for a while that I put up with that. I guess, sort of like an abusive relationship. Why did I let this person keep hitting me? Like, I'm stronger than that, I'm braver than that. I have the ability to stand up for myself, and yet I just kept going back to this job. It's like, it was ridiculous. (Participant 1109)

It's almost like Stockholm syndrome sometimes, you don't know how bad it is when you're in it, and now that I'm out of it, I was like, "Why did I put up with that for so long?" (Participant 1023)

I'm also frustrated because I feel like I haven't stood up for myself on some level. I feel like my partner was just like, "[Participant name], you need to get a backbone." (Participant 1509)

The sad part is I didn't tell people why I was doing that. I just said that I wanted to go work with some of the females at the younger level, the younger grades, to try to help with the mean girls. So I just kind of covered up. I don't know why I did that, honestly. (Participant 5005)

Subcategory 4.b: Lack of Confidence in Abilities
Concerned about the ability to perform current position or worthiness of position.

I think that that negatively impacted, I guess, a little bit of my self-worth, for lack of better words, and it's something that I still think probably even translates a little bit. Sometimes I doubt my abilities if I'm at the table.
Right now, I'm in a director role. I manage a whole center, but sometimes I think, "Oh, my gosh. Should I be here? Am I competent enough? Am I qualified enough?" (Participant 4004)

Yeah, and time to learn to own it, and be like, "Yeah, I earned this. I have earned this." But I feel like some of the leftover of that is like I would hear my former toxic leaders be like something along the lines of like I didn't deserve it or that kind of thing. (Participant 3003)

Sometimes it sneaks up on me, those fears and the hesitation because I used to drive things. I was a driver. Okay, we're on this train. That was one of my things. Okay, we're on the train today, and we have 19 cars, and we've got to get all of them into the station on time. Are we going to be able to do it? Is anybody not going to be able to meet their goals? I can't today. I'm like, okay, let's talk about it. Now, I'm like, "Okay, I'm the tail end. Pull me along, please." (Participant 1010)

I just wanted to highlight again that it really made me feel like I was a step down from the rest of the people in this department. Because we had workshops with lots of faculty that were a day or a full week or something over the summer sometimes, and everyone took on a little part, but I was mostly making coffees or things and getting coffee and making sure everyone was happy. I was really running more of an aide type position rather than what my position was, and I get that there's, yeah you have to work your way up to it or since they had been in their jobs for so long, they were trying to still figure out what types of things I was going to take over or be doing, but I really felt dumb. It really made me feel like I wasn't as good as the rest of them. It really made me scared when I was thinking about leaving. (Participant 9009)

So the timeline. That made me a little cautious as I went to my next job. I think I might have asked questions in times when I could have... in terms of, okay, I don't ever want to be in a situation like this. So I'm going to always ask for what's the expectation for this. I probably didn't need to do that. That didn't help me. (Participant 1887)

The other thing is that any time I do something that's not perfect because everybody makes mistakes, right? Right, like you move ahead with something without confirming with everybody on earth that they're fine with it, and then you find out somebody wasn't fine with it, and it becomes a thing. "Okay. I'm sorry I dropped the ball," but I personalized that really, really intensely and any criticism. (Participant 6007)
c. **Subcategory 4.c: Lack of Confidence in Their Experience**

Wondering if their feelings about the toxic leader were “normal.”

I'd love to see and hear some of the feedback. Of course, without names and all that, but what you're hearing from other people, like is similar to how I've felt? Am I not crazy because they felt the same way, or I don't know it's just ... and what type of leaders are out there creating this toxic feeling? (Participant 1244)

But yeah, it's kind of made me have more questions to be like [sic], is my experience unusual? Or is it actually pretty common? And I just never talked to anybody about it, because I assumed I was the problem. Because I'm a sensitive person. Does that make sense? What I'm saying? (Participant 2002)

Am I alone in how I feel about this experience? I wanted to do this interview to learn if others feel the same way. (Participant 8008)

5) **Category 5: Influences Individuals Ability to Trust**

Hesitancy to trust others.

I've lost trust, I think. And I keep feeling like I can get that back, but I feel like I spent a long time trusting before. Because I was very committed to my students and the mission, and I took on more, I took on more, I took on more, because of the love. But it really didn't pan out. Yeah. I think now there's a certain amount of ... There's like another barrier I have to work through. (Participant 1509)

I think it definitely influenced my trust in relationships in general, and I guess that's trust in personal relationships, and then maybe I guess it's a trust in institutions. (Participant 8008)

I was always a be kind to everybody first. Do unto others what you have them do unto you. My behavior was always make sure that you leave people better than you found them. He didn't. I think that has really just taken trust away, and I look at people under a different microscope. (Participant 1010)

I tend to be pretty Pollyanna about people's personalities. And I assume that everyone is a good person until they prove me wrong. But it has made me just kind of sit back and be more contemplative when I'm getting to know someone. (Participant 2002)

And learning how to trust people again is, whether it's colleagues, or trying to figure out, sort of stopping my automatic response or my bolt response of who should I be trusting, who should I not be trusting? What is the politicking that's
going on? Do I need to be doing that? Is this person trustable? And then some of that's all very natural when you go into a new culture. Except that, I was coming from a very, very guarded, distrustful place, right? I had operated that way for 14 years. And so trying to dismantle some of those kinds of things and how to engage with colleagues and have genuine relationships with my new supervisor. (Participant 1366)

Even though I love working at [current organization], and trust, there's still a side of me that has this lack of trust... When's the other shoe going to drop? When am I going to be... When is somebody not going to make good on a promise that's been made to me? (Participant 1509)

I was not protected by my direct supervisor at my last position. So, there is some level of me that will always be like, are you going to go to bat for me or not? So this level of distrust that is now inherent. It wasn't there before that supervisor. And there's also, with co-workers, that toxic environment really, the snake brain appears. (Participant 1614)

I think I came into this position, probably in a little bit of protective mode, I think I'm more observant as to how this leader runs things just because I've had to... really I was in close touch with the other leader, and so I've been trying to watch and trying to read, I guess, how to handle things with her. (Participant 1244)

I had to think a little while to realize, yeah, they're not all like that. They're not all going to be suspicious of what I do, or they're not all going to want to breathe down my neck for every small piece of what I do. If I have to miss a day of work or if I have to hand this in late, they're not going to fire me, or they're not going to email the whole department and say how disappointed they are. That's not a thing. That's not a real thing. (Participant 1887)

Yeah. So, I think that perspective is, for me, it's having this cynical perspective that everyone's out to get me because I always felt like she was out to get me. And I think people that weren't living my life would say, "Oh, you should always assume positive intent." Oh my. So I have a really hard time now assuming positive intent because I had so many years of everything I did was wrong. So that's going to probably take me a long time to get over and hopefully not that long. (Participant 1023)

I feel like it's definitely made me more hesitant to take on projects where I'm sharing it with someone. I feel like it needs to just be mine because I felt like I was never able to do anything if that makes sense. (Participant 9009)

Yeah, it was very disappointing. They just brushed it under the rug, clearly. I was really worried when this group of teachers who were also veteran teachers, outstanding teachers, I mean, [toxic leader] did some things to them too, more
like, "Come sit on my lap." And [co-worker] would say, "My kids are old enough... I'm old enough to be, whatever," she said. She goes, "I'll beat you with my own wooden stick, you old dirty pig." Like he would say, just sexual things like that to some of these other people. (Participant 5005)

The here, in this situation, I think that's what made me really look at people's intentions, look at what people are saying and really pay attention a little bit more, and then trusting your gut feeling because, in the beginning, my husband always said, he's like, "I remember, even in the first interview you had with that guy, and you said that he was going to be a problem, and sure enough, here you are. Fast forward, and he was a problem." (Participant 7007)

That's why any time I see any cropping up, even in my company of people I don't report to that might be toxic, I just like blare the red horn like, "We need to put this in check. I'm concerned about this person. (Participant 1109)

6) **Category 6: Past Toxic Leaders Influence Followers Appreciation for Current Situation**

Gratitude for “little” things that could be seen as expected from a work environment.

*I'm enormously grateful now. I have this level of gratitude and perspective now.* (Participant 1509)

*I guess it just made me so much more appreciative when you have a good boss. It's not lost on me that not everyone is afforded that luxury, to have a boss who cares about your well-being.* (Participant 2002)

*I can definitely say I'm much more appreciative of the environment that I'm in now.* (Participant 1244)

*You could tell that basically when we decided as a group to go in a certain direction, there were systems in place and things that were going to happen and fall into place in order to move forward with the initiative. That was very refreshing to be able to experience that.* (Participant 7007)

*I love my new boss and my coworkers, and that's new. So that's also trying to find joy and be happy for myself that I got out, I did the thing. I survived, and now I'm in something good and positive, and not taking it for granted, I think, is new.* (Participant 1023)

*I was really unhealthy mentally because of that toxicity and just the everyday, that pressure and the needing to protect yourself, and trying to figure out who can I
engage with in relationships, and how to navigate that space, because nothing really was, there wasn't a productive, consistent way to do that. And so, having a year where I don't have that. It's like this huge layer of stress and anxiety and...criticism, but not, I love some critical feedback. But there's criticism, and then there's degrading. And so to live without that is kind of earth-shattering, and yet it's so basic, right? It's such a; it's this basic, basic thing. (Participant 1366)

Yeah. It was just anything to get out. I knew it was not a position that I wanted. But I knew something else, I hoped something else would come available, and it did. Thank God for [current organization]. I felt like [current organization] was just such a meant-to-be thing for me. I still do. (Participant 1509)

Yeah, I feel like this place, in particular, is where I feel the most connected to colleagues, most connected to people to work with them, but also just to be able to have people to go over, and say hi to, and have lunch with, and people to go...You could hang out after work, and that's always a great thing. (Participant 1887)

[Current leader] always wants to have good people on the bus, and then we'll figure out the right role. She understands career jungle gyms, so she wasn't worried about the fact that I'm overqualified for my position. (Participant 6007)

More excited, more relaxed when I go home, and I'm smiling, and when I walk out the door in the morning, [partner] will look at me, and he'll say, "Well, I hope you have a good day." And then he'll go, "Well, of course, you're going to." It used to be before, "Be strong, you can do this." And now it's, "You're going to have a good day." He just knows already. He can see it that I'm much more relaxed in the evenings, I'm not panicked all the time, I'm not feeling that anxiety of what's to come tomorrow and I don't know, it's just a whole different feeling, and I'm sure it'll be better even more over time that I don't even realize. (Participant 1244)

So they've been very, very transparent about it, which has helped. We're doing okay now; we're in a better place financially than we were a year ago, which is crazy because there's a pandemic that really rocked our trainings. (Participant 1614)

I definitely enjoy the flexibility and the trust that my supervisor and the [current organization] have in me and my position, and I feel like that I'm earning it definitely by the results of what we're doing. (Participant 9009)

Even when I have to say, "I know it's a terrible idea, or this is really not going well, or this happened, and it was really bad," I'm never fearful of her reaction. I'm never fearful of telling her something, of her taking what I say in the wrong way, any of that kind of stuff. (Participant 1109)
### Leadership Culture Code Formation from Categories and Subcategories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and subcategory</th>
<th>Solution Needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Changing followers as people.</strong></td>
<td>Toxic leaders should not be allowed to be in leadership positions in an organization. Dedicated focus on leadership and what is not acceptable from leaders. Toxic leaders cannot persist in leadership positions. In other words, eradicate toxic leadership in an organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcategories:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Health implications that are forever part of the story.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Perceived as trauma/traumatic experience.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Stunted career growth.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Current work lives.</strong></td>
<td>Again, toxic leaders need to be eliminated in organizations because they continue to influence lives. Additionally, training for leaders can help leaders create environments that are “safe” for followers. Train leaders to understand their followers’ past experiences may still influence followers’ emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcategories:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influence emotions and thoughts at work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influence behaviors and actions at work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Leadership.</strong></td>
<td>Supports the need for training. Leaders and followers can learn about leadership by understanding toxic leadership. Specifically, training can be developed about what toxic leadership is, and examples can be provided to illustrate toxic leadership. This can advance individuals’ leadership practice and understanding of leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcategories:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Their leadership practice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• General thoughts about leadership.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Self-confidence.</strong></td>
<td>Again, toxic leaders need to be eradicated in organizations because they continue to influence followers. Create a culture in an organization where individuals can gain confidence in their judgment by training them on what toxic leadership is and what positive leadership is. To further assist with judgment, specifically, articulate what is and is not accepted in leadership to allow individuals to have confidence in their thinking and feelings. Provide safe avenues to report toxic leadership so followers can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcategories:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of confidence in judgment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of confidence in abilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of confidence in their feelings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TOXIC LEADERSHIP: LONG-TERM INFLUENCES

5. Ability to trust. Again, toxic leaders need to be eradicated in organizations because they continue to influence followers. Supports a transparent solution, as transparency helps build trust. Help individuals trust by being clear about leadership expectations. Hold leaders accountable to stated expectations. Create a culture where everyone is aligned with leadership expectations.

6. Appreciation for current work situation. No real solution is needed for this category. Organizations should know the past followers of toxic leaders are more appreciative of a good environment. Thus, creating a positive and safe culture will continue to help with employee retention and satisfaction. Followers will continue to be more appreciative with a focus on positive leadership.

Overall Aim. Intentional focus on amplifying followers’ voices to understand toxic leadership’s long-term influences. The solution needs to be rooted in amplifying the followers’ voices. This can be accomplished by creating awareness and accountability. Additionally, organizational structures, processes, and allies are needed.