Scientific
Research
Publishing

Toxic Workplace Environment and Employee Engagement

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to understand how organizations can eradicate the toxicity from their work environment to enhance employee engagement by exploring the toxic work environment causes, consequences and possible solutions. This research aim is achieved by qualitatively exploring the findings proposed by previous studies to generate the desired knowledge. Review of previous findings reveals that toxic work environment is caused by multiple reasons, such as-poor leadership, ineffective management, poor communication, a culture of fear and consistent stress with lack of concern towards employees' psychological well-being. When unaddressed, toxic work environment leads towards disengaged workforce with affected physical and psychological health. The overall conclusion drawn from the reported findings is that: toxic work environment can be a serious threat for the employees as well as organizations. If employees will persistently work in toxic environment, they will be disengaged, and de-motivated to give their best efforts for accomplishment of organizational goals. The feelings that emerge from the workplace toxicity can negatively influence the physical and psychological health of employees, which can affect the organizations by reducing productivity and increasing turnover costs.

Keywords

Toxic Work Environment, Employee Engagement, Workplace Toxicity Causes, Toxic Work Environment Solutions, Workplace Toxicity Consequences, Motivation, Psychological Well-Being

1. Introduction

Toxic workplace environment has become a serious cause of concern for the

modern business organizations due to its devastating consequences for individuals and organizations. When workplace toxicity remains unhandled for a long time period, it affects the physical and psychological health of employees, reduced their engagement and productivity, and ultimately weakens the organizations' competitive positioning (Taylor & Rew, 2011; Rasool et al., 2021). The excessive reliance of modern business organizations on their human rather than technical and financial capital further intensifies the consequences of toxic environment for organizations. Growing workplace toxicity due to excessive stress and intensifying competition is compelling the organizations to understand the causes, consequences and possible solutions of toxic environment for ensuring long-term survival in competitive market. However, Rasool et al. (2021) mentioned dearth of knowledge to understand relationship between toxic work environment and employee engagement due to victims' unwillingness to openly speak about the workplace toxicity.

The literature review further revealed that mostly, previous studies have focused on exploring either causes or consequences of toxic work environment, and only limited number of studies specifically focused on how workplace toxicity influences the work engagement. Literature is also limited to synthesize the existing findings, and mostly studies have collected empirical data based on self-reported surveys, which suffer from risk of sharing exaggerated opinions and possibility of social desirability bias (Fisher & Katz, 2000). Therefore, the current research paper attempted to explore the causes, consequences and solutions of toxic work environment based on existing data with specific focus on the work engagement.

The novelty of this paper is established by following arguments. First, the study develops the arguments based on the findings of previous studies rather than using self-reported surveys. Second, the use of secondary data allowed researcher to cover research problem from multiple dimensions (including: causes, consequences and solutions), and third, focus of this paper remains on understanding the practical implications of the reported findings rather than building theoretical knowledge (as done by most of the previous studies) to report results that could help policy makers and human resource managers in developing and implementing stricter policies for eradicating workplace toxicity.

2. Discussion

The discussion is organized into three sub-sections: toxic work environment causes, consequences and possible solutions.

2.1. Causes of Toxic Work Environment

A study by Harvard Business Review revealed that workplace toxicity caused by excessive stress reduces the employee engagement, employees are three times more likely to leave the organization, and their creative and strategic thinking capabilities get temporarily impaired (Peart, 2019). In USA, the burnout caused

the toxic work environment costs more than $ 300 billion in form of reduced work engagement and productivity, and increased absenteeism, turnover and medical/insurance costs (Peart, 2019). These monetary costs suggest that development of a positive work environment is a great cause of concern for organizational management. In literature, toxic work environment refers the violent treatment of persons, which may jeopardize the employees' health and safety (Rasool et al., 2020). In order to understand how toxic work environment influences the organizations at individual and collective level, and how toxicity can be eradicated, management needs to firstly deepen their knowledge of causes and signs of work environment toxicity.

The toxic work environment is mainly caused by the poor organizational leadership that excessively focuses on the short-term gains, which drains the energy of workforce, and ultimately makes the workplace toxic for employees. An overly formalized culture with rigid boundaries segregating the management from operation level staff along with poor communication, lack of informal communication and a culture of fear that deters the employees from giving honest feedback can make the situation worse by further encouraging workplace toxicity (Field, 2014). Excessive workplace stress can be another reason for the toxic work environment. An extensive body of literature is available to confirm the link between workplace stress, burnout and work environment toxicity (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Employees' concerns towards toxic organizational leadership and persistent work stress should be carefully listened, and relevant actions should be taken to avoid the consequences.

It is important for management to pay immediate attention towards some signs that may signal the workplace toxicity, and do not solely rely on the information/concerns shared by employees, as sometimes, employees hesitate to raise their voice against workplace toxicity, due to which the issue goes unaddressed, and causes serious damage in the long-run. Some common signs as cited in literature include: persistently high turnover rate, reducing workplace morale, lack of motivation to take challenging initiatives, and deteriorating physical and psychological well-being of workforce (Lockhart, 2018; Field, 2014).

In next sub section, the findings of previous studies are discussed to understand the consequences of the workplace toxicity with specific focus on the work engagement as multi-dimensional motivational construct.

2.2. Consequences of Workplace Toxicity and Reduced Engagement

A plethora of literature is available to understand how workplace toxicity affects the individual and organizations. Job engagement is a motivational construct, which is expressed through individuals' vigour, dedication and absorption in assigned job role (Ford et al., 2016). One of the serious consequences of toxic environment is reduced employee engagement, which affects the organizations at individual and collective level. Consistent workplace toxicity leads the employees to experience aggression, which reduces vigour, dedication and absorption at

work (Rasool et al., 2021). The individual level consequences are found to be strongly connected with organization level consequences in the long-run. Excessive stress and toxic work environment hamper the employees' abilities to cope with the challenges. When management remains unable to understand the signs of toxic environment, and does not take remedial measures, then in the long-run, it affects the organizations' ability to ensure quick adaptation with the changing work environment (Anjum & Ming, 2018).

Studies like Rasool et al. (2021) develop a significant negative relationship between toxic work environment and employees' physical and psychological health, both of which share a strong connection with the work engagement and overall organizational productivity. These findings imply that management can only enhance the organizational effectiveness when it is able to recruit, manage and retain workforce with good physical and psychological health. It is particularly true in the service industry, where employees are in direct contact with the customers, and any threat to their (employees') physical and psychological well-being can harm the organization's image in front of customers (Salanova et al., 2005).

With specific focus on engagement, the literature review reveals that understanding the direct impact of toxic work environment on the employee engagement is a challenging task, primarily because only a few workers remain willing to formally launch the complaints against toxic work behaviour (Taylor & Rew, 2011). The silence and avoidance of the victims make it difficult for researchers to understand the complexity of relationship between toxic work environment and engagement (Berquist et al., 2018). These findings hold high practical importance for the modern business organizations, as hesitance to openly share the concerns towards workplace toxicity (as noted by studies like Berquist et al., 2018) suggests the managers to adopt a supportive and collaborative leadership style by supervisors, who could formally and informally interact with sub-ordinates, build their confidence and encourage them to raise their voice against any kind of workplace toxicity (Taylor & Rew, 2011).

The link between toxic work environment and work engagement has strong theoretical roots in different organizational and management theories and concepts, which mean the reported practically applicable findings derive support from relevant theories whose validity has been extensively confirmed. For example, according to Rasool et al. (2021), the relationship between toxic work environment and employee engagement derives theoretical support from the COR (conservation of resource) theory, which proposes that resource loss (in form of lost sense of security, safety and happiness at workplace due to toxic environment) is more harmful to individuals and organizations than resource gain (measures taken to increase sense of safety and security). Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory also proposes that employees' sense of security and safety lies at the bottom of pyramid, and toxic work environment makes employees feel unsafe and insecure (Growe & Person, 2017).

In connection with Maslow's theory, engagement theory argues that employees need to feel physically and psychologically safe and secure, must have access to the emotional, cognitive and psychological resources, and must consider their job meaningful to remain engaged in their job, which is enacted through vigour, dedication and absorption (Kahn, 1990; Kahn, 1992). In a toxic work environment, it is reasonable to expect that the employees get disengaged due to loss to sense of security, and lack of access to valuable cognitive, emotional and psychological resources (Rodriguez-Munoz et al., 2009).

Although, engagement theory operationalizes the engagement behaviour through three sub constructs: dedication, absorption and vigour, some later studies (like Bakker & Albrecht, 2018) considered engaged employees as the ones who are emotionally stable, self-guided, self-motivated, proactive, entrepreneurial, creative and committed to make active contribution in organizational development. Now, when these findings are analyzed in light of literature that covers toxic work environment consequences, it becomes obvious that toxic environment affects the employees' psychological well-being across all of the identified constructs (Anjum et al., 2018). Employees who are exposed to violence, harassment, consistent stress and ostracism (all are dimensions of workplace toxicity) lack self motivation and emotional stability (Danaher, 2021), are passive, and less productive (Anjum et al., 2018), have low self-efficacy (Danaher, 2021), and do not adopt creative work behaviour to make valuable contribution in organizational development (Kulkarni et al., 2018). These findings reflect how workplace toxicity affects different engagement dimensions, causing significant losses to the individuals and organizations.

When these findings are applied in real world context, the managers can expect a significant loss in the cumulative human capital, which represents the collection of intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, judgement, experience, skills, abilities and talents possessed by the workforce. The accumulated human capital can only be effectively leveraged in supportive work environment (Levitt, 2014). It suggests that the extensive investments on recruiting, training, managing and retaining the top talent can offer no return if management remains unable to provide the facilitating environment. Absence of positivity can reduce the human capital value, while, presence of toxicity can turn accumulated human capital from asset to liability, as according to some studies (like Field, 2014; Anjum et al., 2018), persistence workplace toxicity can induce the employees to indulge in work behaviours that may harm the organization. These literature findings have serious implications for organizations, and cannot be avoided if organizations want to remain competitive and relevant in the market.

While discussing the influence of toxic work environment on the employee engagement, Ford et al. (2016) made a very interesting insight by proposing that toxic work environment makes engaged work employees angrier than the disengaged employees, which may translate into more activist or retaliatory behaviours. It implies that supervisors/human resource managers can consider the "anger" as a signal of workplace toxicity. It is recommended to collaborate with

them and carefully listen to their concerns before they get indulged into retaliatory behaviour, or may ultimately leave the organization (Ford et al., 2016).

Overall, a glimpse over the consequences of toxic work environment reported in literature suggests that the management's inability to understand the causes and signs of workplace toxicity can not only cause intangible (reduced morale, motivation and engagement) but also tangible costs (turnover, reduced performance and productivity). Literature also cites examples of some successful organizations that strive to foster the positive work environment by deepening their understanding of workplace psychology. For instance, Google has integrated fun and flexibility into its work environment to avoid stress and toxicity, and increase employee engagement, which revitalizes the innovation and creativity (Brooks, 2018). In next section, the discussion highlights some possible solutions for handling and avoiding the workplace toxicity.

In next sub section, the findings of previous studies are reviewed to explore the key solutions for eradicating the toxicity from the work environment. The practical implications for the policy makers and human resource managers are also discussed.

2.3. Possible Solutions for Toxic Work Environment

Eradication of toxicity from the work environment is challenging, yet possible through effective management strategies. Review of relevant studies on workplace toxicity considers autonomy and empowerment at all organizational levels an important tool to make work environment less toxic for employees, who operate in a highly controlled and stressed work environment, in which supervisors tend to micromanage everything, which hampers employees' creative potential, resulting into lose of interest in the assigned job (Gilbert et al., 2012). Another possible solution for eradicating the toxicity is discouraging the culture and fear, and instilling confidence in the workers so that they may openly share their concerns towards a particular aspect that affects their motivation and engagement at work (Gilbert et al., 2012). Open information sharing, trust on the transparency of organizational operations, informal communication and frequent collaboration between management and employees are some well-recognized management strategies that are powerful enough to keep employees motivated even under stressful conditions (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, consistent stress and consequent toxicity directly affects the employees' psychological well-being. Introducing counselling sessions and providing mentoring and coaching opportunities can also help management in dealing with the toxic work environment consequences. However, it is more important to adopt the preventive strategies that could prevent work environment from becoming toxic (Field, 2014). Introduction of some free psychological counselling sessions can only be effective, when coupled with other more effective measures (like empowerment, autonomy, structural flexibility and cultural openness and informality).

Another effective way to handle the toxic work environment issue is adoption of positive leadership style that could develop friendship with the subordinates, and collaborate with employees to instil hope and positivity. Leaders must take the responsibility and play an active role in re-establishing the sense of security, which is vital for developing a motivated and engaged workforce. It is important to take everyone on board to win the employees' trust, and make them believe that organization cares about the employees' psychological health, and values their contribution in the organizational development (Field, 2014).

After discussing the causes, consequences and possible solutions to eradicate the toxicity from work environment, next section concludes the whole discussion by summarizing key points.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, toxic work environment can affect the organizational performance by disengaging the employees from their job. The disengagement can not only affect the psychological well-being of employees, but can also harm the organization by reducing productivity and increasing turnover costs. Workplace toxicity is equally detrimental for employees and organizations. Therefore, understanding the toxic work environment causes and consequences is highly important to devise the effective management strategies that could eradicate the toxicity from work environment, and encourage employee engagement, which translates into motivation to pursue individual (work related) and organizational goals with full efforts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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