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**WORKPLACE TOXICITY AND LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES**

By

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**Abstract**

Workplace toxicity may negatively influence the well-being and work performance of employees. Best practices of successful leadership approaches and behaviors have been unidentified when addressing low-toxicity work environments. The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to develop a deeper understanding of how leaders selected and applied specific leadership strategies and behaviors in nontoxic workplace environments. Data were collected from 10 participants in New Hampshire using a purposive sampling technique and semistructured interviews based on Alvarado's triangular model of workplace toxicity. This study was structured using a narrative approach to explore ways positive leaders practically implemented styles and behaviors to mitigate workplace toxicity. All participants met this study's qualification parameters; they had past experiences with toxic leaders that shaped their personal leadership styles. NVivo was used to compare and analyze data from all interview transcripts entered for recurring themes. These themes were coded according to how answers connected to a specific research question, and findings were collated across interviews to form results. Three major themes emerged from the data: experience with toxic leadership, leadership approaches to toxicity, and leadership behaviors toward toxicity. Insights from this study may help company leaders avoid lawsuits, low productivity levels, and high staff turnover due to toxic workplace elements left unattended or ineffectively managed. The study may contribute to positive social change by generating practical models of and suggestions for creating a less toxic work environment, thereby creating healthier and happier employees, which increases public wellbeing and company success,

**Keywords: Workplace Toxicity, Leadership Strategies**

**INTRODUCTION**

Researchers have determined that leaders can influence worker wellbeing and working environments (Mathieu et al., 2014; Sun, Gergen, Avila, & Green, 2016; Tse & Chiu, 2014). Hadadian and Zarei (2016) determined that toxic leadership directly correlated to increased levels of job stress for employees. Similarly, Mehta and Maheshwari (2014) explained that toxic leadership translated to low employee and overall company performance. In contrast, Tse and Chiu (2014), and Pradhan and Pradhan (2015) confirmed that nontoxic, transformational, or

positive leadership could lead to improved employee satisfaction and well-being, lower levels of employee and leadership stress, and generally more successful companies.

Researchers have depicted how toxic work environments were often cyclical (Field, 2014; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Negative leadership could translate to demotivated and stressed workers, who might feed into the negativity and lessen company success that would cause the cycle to continue (Erickson, Shaw, Murray, & Branch, 2017; Padilla et al., 2007).

Fraher (2016) examined this kind of



cycle and discovered the toxic triangle. Through the concept of the toxic triangle, Fraher determined workers, leaders, and the general work environment all interplayed with one another, with toxic or nontoxic behaviors filtering down from the top leader down, and then between factors. Leaders must prioritize nontoxic leadership to ensure nontoxic work environments (Breevaart et al., 2014). Leaders stepping into a toxic environment due to a predecessor's negative approaches or other factors might need to employ nontoxic leadership strategies to improve or counteract the toxic leanings of workers and the general environment (Erickson et al., 2017).

Field (2014) verified that workplace toxicity ensued through prolonged negativity. Workers and/or leaders may face conflict regarding broken expectations that can lead to negativity (Field, 2014). Such breaks or disappointments are bound to occur when different individuals share space and interactions, such as in a workplace (Jain & Kaur, 2014). If leaders effectively and timeously address such negativity, they may avoid workplace toxicity (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). The longer leaders take or the less effective they are at addressing a particular negative, the more likely employees can lean toward negative attitudes, gossip, and other toxic behaviors (Burns, 2017; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). This negativity will then spread, and more individuals will become prone to negative behaviors and attitudes, further perpetuating the cycle of toxicity (Burns, 2017; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). Leaders should employ positive leadership styles and behaviors by implementing clear and productive problem-solving to limit the potential for toxicity developing in the work environment and thereby influencing the wellbeing and productivity of workers (Field, 2014).

Leonard (2014) recommended that researchers must study ways to address toxic leadership as such research would improve

working environments. The author's appeal for more research into redressing toxic leadership and thereby improving working environments denotes a gap in the current literature (Leonard, 2014). I met Leonard's (2014) call for additional research to fill the gap by investigating leadership and leadership strategies for nontoxic work environments.

Cotton (2016) explored means for employees to cope with toxic work environments. Cotton determined that a current gap in the literature regarding if and how positive leadership could counter toxic work environments, especially from the leader perspective. I filled this gap by producing research regarding leaders' positive leadership style and behavior choices, as well as how such choices addressed toxicity in the workplace. I filled noted gaps in the literature related to leadership approaches, behaviors, and means for lowering workplace toxicity (see Cotton, 2016; see Leonard, 2014). I filled such gaps to understand better leadership approaches and behaviors that led to improved leadership and assisted in improving the work environment. Better work environments could lead to happier and more productive workers, thereby benefiting businesses and the greater society (Belias & Koustelios, 2014; Field, 2014).

I discussed details regarding the issue of toxic leadership, ways toxic leadership could influence or create toxic work environments, and the effects of such toxicity on employees in this chapter. Researchers have explored ways leadership can either mitigate or instigate workplace toxicity (Cotton, 2016; Field, 2014; Graham et al., 2017).

Researchers have shown a need to identify positive leadership styles and behaviors further (Breevaart et al., 2014; Pradhan & Pradhan, 2015; Tse & Chiu, 2014). Researchers have also indicated a research gap related to leaders' perspectives around

toxic leadership and workplaces (Cotton, 2016; Jain & Kaur, 2014; Mathieu et al., 2014). I examined the influence of nontoxic



leadership on mitigating such toxicity. The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to develop a deeper understanding of how leaders selected and applied specific strategies and behaviors in nontoxic workplace environments. The reason for the selection of nontoxic workplace environments was because the strategies that have proven effective in these settings may provide insight as to effective ways to circumvent the presence of a toxic workplace environment. This study was focused on a population of government and nongovernment institutions in the state of New Hampshire,

### LITERATURE REVIEW

From this literature review, all three aspects of the toxic triangle not only perpetuate workplace toxicity, but these also need to be dealt with as both individual issues and about each other (Alvarado, 2016; Erickson et al., 2017; Fraher, 2016; Pradhan & Pradhan, 2015). The conceptual framework provided a means to show this toxic triangle (Alvarado, 2016). The literature review strengthened the ideas, laid out in the AWEST, by noting how toxic leadership, toxic followers, and toxic environments often correlated with factors, such as bullying and favoritism (Alvarado, 2016; Boddy, 2014; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014).

This literature review provided insights into factors that heightened the toxic triangle, such as maladaptive leaders and followers, microaggression, and overall corporate cultures where toxicity was allowed or encouraged (Campbell & Göritz, 2014; Guenole, 2014; McKee et al., 2017). Also noted was the toxic effect that leadership, toxic worker relations, and factors like discrimination had on workers (Basford et al., 2014; Jones & Williams, 2013; Laschinger et al., 2014; Mathieu et al., 2014). Researchers have confirmed that workers subjected to toxic work environments reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, family conflict, and low productivity (Boddy,

2014; Cotton, 2016; Fiordelisi & Ricci, 2014; Linton et al., 2015; Torres & Taknint, 2015). If workers felt victimized and/or were not given organizational support or the opportunity to speak out, they faced further toxicity, higher staff turnover, and distrust (Burns, 2017; Laschinger et al., 2014; Nadal et al., 2014). Continued subjection to toxicity could lead to a deterioration in workers' overall health and wellbeing (Baronce, 2015; Linton et al., 2015; Mathieu et al., 2014; Padilla et al., 2007).

Researchers have suggested the need to counter toxicity in the workplace; they have suggested screening leaders, training leaders in positive leadership styles, and promoting positive problem-solving and relationship building were suggested (Aarons et al., 2015; Keller Hansborough & Jones, 2014; Leonard, 2014; Schmidt, 2014; Sosik et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). Researchers noted providing workers with a platform to voice their concerns and addressing negative issues with hierarchy (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Hewlett, 2016; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). The literature review also indicated a gap related to how positive leaders implemented and came to the styles and behaviors they chose. Instead, most researchers have noted that positive leadership styles existed and worked to mitigate workplace toxicity (Breevaart et al., 2014; Pradhan & Pradhan, 2015; Rego et al., 2014; Tse & Chiu, 2014). I provided valuable information regarding positive leader choices and the practical applications of such leadership.

### RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter highlighted the chosen qualitative narrative research approach and provided reasoning for why this particular methodology was chosen. Specifically, I highlighted how providing reasoning for leadership style and behavior choices required a narrative approach, as well as how other qualitative and quantitative methodologies failed to meet this need (Bryman, 2016; Locke et al., 2014). I noted that other research



approaches into the same or similar areas might be needed in the future to substantiate this study's findings and design.

I used purposive sampling with set criteria to ensure that the most relevant participants were interviewed for the study, as suggested by Robinson (2014). Allowances were made if an insufficient number of leaders from the chosen study sites met the sample criteria or drop out of the study. Provisions included extending the study to a third similar both government and nongovernment institutions in the same New Hampshire area, to which I also had access, or recruiting additional leaders from those participants kept on record due to their positive responses and signed informed consent forms from in the chosen companies. I interviewed 10 leaders from different departments in the respective study sites. Each interview lasted three hours, with the potential for an additional one-hour Skype follow-up interview.

I presented the various methods for data collection and analysis, including how interviews were conducted, the kinds of supporting documentation used, and how the documentation substantiated interviewee claims. The physical analysis of the interview and documentation data was discussed. How I used NVivo and Transcribe, as well as how I ensured data accuracy before commencing thematic software analysis, was presented.

I highlighted how and why a field test was conducted, along with an expert panel review of the interview protocol, to limit researcher bias (see Appendix A). Other provisions, such as member-checking, data triangulation, and study credibility, reliability, and validity were discussed (Corbin et al., 2015). A discussion on the informed consent form created after IRB approval was given. Issues around ethical study practices, confidentiality, anonymity, participant rights, potential negative researcher interference, or conflicts of interest due to my role at the study site were also presented, as were the respective means for mitigation

and/or assurances (Elo et al., 2014; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Demographics

I recruited participants with leadership positions from different industries. Participants for this study were required to meet the following criteria to be considered: (a) participants must be leaders in their industry; (b) participants must have been active in their current leadership role for at least 3 years (to have a record of accomplishment of their leadership choices and consequences); and (c) participants must have reported high levels of productivity and worker satisfaction. Given this inclusion criteria, I chose 10 participants for the sample. Participants were also required to have had experience with toxic workplace circumstances but were not required to be associated with or involved in a toxic workplace situation at the time of the study. Table 1 demonstrates the backgrounds of each of these participants.

**Themes.** Three major themes emerged from the data: experience with toxic leadership, leadership approaches to toxicity, and leadership behaviors toward toxicity.

With the first theme of past experience with toxic leadership, there were two subthemes: impact on current style of leadership and undoing toxic leadership. The second theme of leadership approaches to toxicity had two subthemes, as well: approaching toxic individuals and reducing workplace toxicity. Finally, the third theme of leadership behaviors toward toxicity had three subthemes: mitigating toxic behaviors, adapting behaviors, and nontoxic behaviors as a leader.

### Data Analysis Procedures

After every interview, I transcribed the individual's interview using the online Transcribe software. I typed the physical notes for the interview and then manually combined



the transcribed audio-recordings and physical notes into one document. After member checking, I inputted the interview data into NVivo to compare and analyze data from all interview transcripts entered for recurring themes. I coded these themes according to how these answers connected to a specific research question and collated findings across the various interviews to form the final results of the study.

**Results**

The results of this study are presented below, demonstrated through major themes and subthemes, and supported by quotes and anecdotes from the participants. Three major themes emerged from the data: past experience with toxic leadership, leadership approaches to toxicity, and leadership behaviors toward toxicity.

**Past Experiences with Toxic Leadership**

The first major theme was past experiences with toxic leadership. With this theme, there were two subthemes: impact on current leadership style and undoing toxic leadership.

**Impact on current leadership style.** In this first subtheme, participants explained the ways their experiences with toxic leaders had influenced their leadership style currently. For most participants, they saw behavior modeled that they would not themselves model, and doing the opposite of what the toxic leader did. As L2 said, It influenced my work style that it gave me examples of bad management, bad performance to not do myself. I guess I would say that it comes to me back when I experienced it taught me not to do the same as a leader.

More specifically, L3 and L4 described learning about the need for respect from past toxic leaders. L3 said:

During 2011 to 2012, the Speaker of the House of the State Legislature was a very toxic person . . . In any leadership role, it is important to treat everybody with respect. You have to try and work with anybody who disagrees and get them on the same page. When anybody makes

a big deal about having power over you, you have to work with that person to become communicative and work with you.

L4 echoed those comments:

If you work under somebody who you are able to respect and you can work with easily. I think that you kind of desire those traits in yourself. If you are put in that situation that you see that that is how it should work.

In a similar vein, L10 said that past toxic leadership had inspired the need to listen: “You must listen before you make decisions. Toxic supervisors do not want to listen to what you have to say. That influences me to want to listen and not be a toxic supervisor.” For L1, the past toxic leader showed a lack of understanding and support:

I would say the example of the toxic boss that I had was a complete lack of understanding, particularly quite frankly, after I had children, that there was more to one's professional life [than] just the 8 hours in the office and showing no appreciation for that caused me to really dislike my job and not produce as well. And so the sum result was I ended up leaving.

Instead, L1 said that she was clear and specific in her leadership role to be unambiguous in her expectations:

I think in terms of what I tried to do . . . if there's something that I think we used to be done and needs to be done quickly, it's important that I am very clear about that. I'm very detail-oriented way of doing their job, and they have to know absolutely with the end result is going to be, as they go down that path. That is, they not going to hear how quickly I need something done and so being really clear about times and the sort of milestones in a project, it is incumbent upon me to make that very clear.

L6 described the difference between surviving and thriving, attributing the former to past toxic leadership and the latter to the current leadership style:

I learned that it was very bad for the organization to have such leadership, and I was



determined not to be that kind of leader myself because I didn't want the organization to suffer. When you have toxic leaders . . . at best, the organization suffers. It doesn't work as well as it should. Would most likely survive, but thrive?

. . . A good organization wants to advance and thrive, wants to expand. And with a toxic leader you can't do that. The best leaders are those that inspire people to do their best, that makes them love their job, except for just because they love the leader, not because they're forced to or threatened.

For L7, this came down to promoting and embracing positivity:

I have experienced leadership that didn't want to deal with problems, which left the rest of us having to deal with it the best way we could. And I found the best way that I could was to keep positive attitude, to not let my discouragement show around my coworkers, to deal with them in a professional manner. Knowing there were problems and trying to have positive communications with them.

Two participants (20%) learned more from nontoxic leaders. As L2 explained, communication and vulnerability were key: From those individuals I learned two things. Number one is open communications, which will be no surprise to anybody. Probably those folks that I would consider strong nontoxic leaders had very strong communication skills and encouraged communication. That was one. The second thing I learned from the nontoxic leaders that come to mind is vulnerability. They were able to lead, but at the same time show that they were just as vulnerable as the rest of us, which may sound counterintuitive that you don't want to think of a leader as being vulnerable. But at the same time the strong leaders that I've worked with were able to show that they were a human and vulnerable like the rest of us that still were strong leaders.

Conversely, L5 had no previous experience with toxic leaders. Instead, the

participant described the importance of nontoxic leaders in the past, particularly as it related to being supportive:

The nontoxic leaders I've had have been very good about helping me come up with teaching strategies that will aid my ability to bring the material to the students in a way that they can understand it better. That's just very supportive of, you know, being there for me when I need help or if I have a problem and trying to help me solve the problem and not just saying, well, you know, figure it out on your own. So always providing any materials that I might need or directing me toward materials that could help me better my teaching skills.

**Undoing of toxic leadership.** The second subtheme examined the ways current leaders had to undo any vestiges of former toxic leadership. Eight of the 10 participants (80%) described the need to undo previous toxic leadership, and all the participants—in slightly different variations—explained they did so by making it clear that the old leadership was gone, and the new leadership was going to do things differently. For L5, this process included having a conversation first, and then listening and understanding:

I explained to my teachers any conflicts [that] there were with the previous director. We discussed them and I made it clear my expectations of them and what they could expect from me so that they knew that I would be more approachable and that they could come to me and talk to me when there was a concern and be very competent. That I would be a good listener and that I will be working with them to help them resolve any problems and approach individual or someone who knew we were in the room environment. I would speak to them directly about what the problem was that created the toxic behavior and work to find a way to resolve it so that we could live without it being an issue.

L6 also discussed the need for open communication, along with servant leadership, to undo previous



toxicity:

The previous leader left and created hurt feelings and anger, disillusionment and the people managed to recover. I simply communicated to the people, talked to them, spent time with them trying to help them...Communication with servant leadership. Communication is the most important, but it can't just be words. One has to do with the people and help them in their tasks and show that a leader is not above willing to get his hands dirty with the work.

For L2, not only was open communication crucial but also laying the groundwork for that communication—including approachability and trust—helped to undo negativity:

I'm thinking of one circumstance in which I came in after a somewhat toxic manager that I replaced and to undo what I did, I worked really hard to. I worked really hard to be approachable and that's part of communication. The person that I replaced was not approachable. I had a truly an open-door policy and people can walk in and talk me at any given point in time about any subject without fear of negative repercussions for them, which wasn't the case with the person that I replaced. So it was, it was doing that. I'm really working hard to do that and to gain their trust.

For L1, communication through outreach was essential, given her political position. Such outreach was premised on understanding and listening:

I think I have done that with a lot of one on one outreach. You know, I'll call a counselor that I know, maybe struggling with something and say, you know, let's talk this through why you feel the way you do. I may not be able to change your mind, but if you can come to an understanding about why others view this that way, you can make more headway.

L1 included an example of such outreach to help temper any toxicity, discussing a hospital to deal with substance abuse:

After I was elected mayor, I had been

doing a lot more with the hospital to try to come up with some resources for the problems we were suffering from the substance misuse issue. And it was highly critical here in the area and within a fairly short period of time of being on the council, I got the head of the hospital, I came to an agreement and we located a place where we could locate a recovery center right in the middle of downtown. People were concerned because it was going to be right off of main street. They were concerned that we're going to be addicts and not going to be a medical clinic just to recovery center for people who were ready to get help to come and get some help...And that was about my literally calling or sitting down with every single city councilor - who some of them did not know me that well - and explaining what we wanted to do, bringing the hospital CEO with me and the and in the end, we supported it...

L3 said that what was "important" was "to wipe the slate clean so we can move ahead and work together." L7 added that positivity, particularly in contrast to past leadership, was effective: "I'm just by showing them that things would improve by keeping a positive attitude. I'm just implementing a happier environment, if that makes sense. I'm trying to show them that I did care about improving things."

One outlier (L4) noted there was never any need to undo any past toxicity. Instead, L4 said that respect and understanding of differences—which included listening and building relationships—was vital to maintaining and improving the positive environment of past leaders:

I've always found that you have to be a respect for everybody. You get to know them, you get to know how they work, their temperaments and sometimes it means you have to treat different people a little differently... Being friendly, asking, being compassionate, if they're not having the best of days, asking them, is there anything you can do to help them? Just listening. Sometimes I think being a good listener is very important, especially in a



leadership position... just being willing to listen and you can sometimes in part what advice some people, certain people that needed it helps just build that respect level [and is] more about how you build a relationship with the coworkers, subordinates or other.

### **Leadership Approaches to Toxicity**

The second major theme to emerge from the data was leadership approaches to toxicity, which explored the attitudes and outlooks leaders have toward toxic individuals. There were two subthemes that came from this major theme: approaching toxic individuals and reducing workplace toxicity.

**Approaching toxic individuals.** The first subtheme was approaching toxic individuals, which examined the ways leaders dealt with subordinates or workers who were toxic. Table 1 presents the categories from the subtheme.

#### **Approaches to Toxic Individuals**

Approach	Number of participants	Percentage of total participants
Conversation	4	40%
Directness	2	20%
Other approaches	4	40%

Four out of the 10 or 40% of participants said that they liked to approach toxic individuals by having a conversation with them. For L5, this conversation was about collective problem solving:

Approach them and try to help get them to at least see both sides. Try to approach them with both sides of the problem and see that certainly you can try to solve the problem together and kind of help them to come in like that as well. Like if you present a problem say, how can we fix this? And try to get them to give you input and then work off of their input to find a happy medium.

L10 also said that consistency and understanding was key:

I keep approaching them. I try to be an adult. I don't badger them. It's not going to get the responses and results that I want. I have to think of the workers. I have to think of what the impact of things would be for other agencies as well. I've learned to solve things that way... I

try to understand what management wants out of situations and you can't approach problems with accusations. How well can we help to really work together? We have to find more effective communication. For L2, the conversation with a toxic individual needed to be neutral and nonaccusatory to help the individual not feel threatened or judged. L2 said it was important to both listen and follow up with the individual:

Recently, one was an individual who others found toxic... It was basically in a non-confrontational manner in that I chose a neutral setting to sit and talk with her and confronted her directly with the feedback that I got it from others, and how she was affecting them in a negative way and gave her an opportunity to explain her position. I can remember telling her specifically that, well, I'm not making a judgment as to who is right or who was wrong, but where she needed to realize is that perceptions were probably just as important and the perception of others of her was negatively affecting her abilities. And she needed to recognize that and work on that piece. I also made a point to take notes to show her when I was talking to her that I was actually listening to her point of view... She knew that I was listening and was actually hearing what she was saying. And then I actually then a follow up our conversation with her with an email and just kind of summarize the takeaways that I took from the conversation and that I was told that she took from the conversation. And by doing that, I had my notes to refer to. It allowed me to kind of frame the conversation afterwards so that, you know, it was beneficial for both of us to kind of just frame the conversation and what direction it went, kind of how we ended.

L6 also said conversation was important, but also said that the way in which one approaches the conversation will depend on the context and the individual. As L6 said, "Every situation's a little different when it comes to actually getting someone." In his current position, "I can come right out and say,





Jesus said, love your neighbor as yourself. In other environments you cannot be quite as direct, but there's still ways to get the point across anyway.” Other ways of approaching the conversation is to “Just use a little bit of humor. You could say something like, ‘That attitude not helping us at all.’” In all of these approaches, though, L6 said that “The common denominator would be communication and again, personality. Those two thing gotta to be stood up. You've got to be clear.”

Two other (20%) participants specifically pointed to a direct approach. For L1, this directness was a function of the toxic individual; for example, L1 felt such an approach was the only way to get through to that individual:

Right now, I'm on the city council. We have one counselor who was extremely vulnerable and oftentimes verbally almost to the point of being verbally abusive to city staff. And I had a private meeting made it crystal clear that I will not tolerate that any longer and that person will be gambled [*sic*] and be declared to be out of order and not be asked to leave the meeting if it happens again. And that may sound like a really over the top way to try to deal with a toxic personality,

but there is no quieting this person. And this is all I can do is make it crystal clear that will give up their ability to sit at that table and vote if they cannot act appropriately . . . I'm doing it with a direct learning that the behavior will not be tolerated.

For L7, directness was more a part of their personality, which was why it was used as an approach:

I am a very honest person, who has always served me well, so I'm not sure this is good advice, but in my experience, I'm very honest. I am not afraid to talk about a problem just in a very matter of fact way. Many people don't want that, so it's difficult. So maybe that's not the best approach, but for me, I don't sugar coat things I just laid on the table and talk about it for what it is. I'm not so much afraid of hurting

people's feelings as other people that I've worked with are. I find that if you're very direct, that's the only way to get to the bottom of things.

The remaining participants had differing ways of approaching toxic individuals. For L3, “The best way is to rebuild trust . . . It is important to make them feel like they are valued so they stand out in a group.” Conversely, L4 tried to lead by example, particularly using positivity: “I think the first step is [to] lead by example and trying to change the subject, discourage whatever negativity and trying to try to combat it with a positive come back.”

**Reducing workplace toxicity.** The second subtheme in the second major theme of leadership approaches to toxicity described how leaders approach reducing overall workplace toxicity. In these categories, two leaders gave multiple answers, which altered the number of answers in each category. Much like the previous subtheme, four leaders or 40% of participants cited using communication as a tool to reduce workplace toxicity. As L2 said, communication was about both listening and being vulnerable as a leader:

Everybody knows communication is so important. Conversations that also, you know, as I mentioned earlier, I tried to display to folks as a leader that I'm, you know, I'm human too. I make mistakes on vulnerable as well. Just because I may be the city manager, doesn't mean that I have all the answers.

L2 said that direct communication was the best method to address toxicity:

I think you've heard the term straight shooter. I've gained a reputation amongst the folks that I supervise, that I'm a straight shooter and that if they are acting in a toxic manner, even if I operated a toxic manner, that we're all going to shoot straight with each other and be honest and communicate and there will be no negative consequences for just being a straight shooter... Once again, I think it comes back to creating an environment in which toxicity will



be tolerated and that if, if we do start down that path or if any department head starts down that path, that we have open communication established, so that we can redirect quickly.

L7 also engaged in blunt conversation, noting that directness was his preferred method, even if not everyone agreed with such an approach:

My approach is very directed, but I'm just not sure that is the most effective way. That's my personal experience and as I said, a lot of people don't like that approach, but I still feel being direct is the best way and if more people were willing to be direct that it would come to solve problems... Because honesty is always best. I don't think that it's right to sugarcoat problems, to protect people's feelings. I feel that if somebody is doing something wrong, it needs to be dealt with directly and I'm skirting around their feelings because then the problem

never gets solved... There are ways to deal with somebody doing the wrong thing by being direct and it doesn't have to hurt them. But you still have to be direct avoiding a problem.

L6 also said direct communication was best, despite being difficult:

You want to promote the communication, but you want to promote the right kind of communication. You want direct communication with the person with whom you had the problem. That takes work that takes work in the part of a leader. You have to teach.

For L5, the lines of communication reduced workplace toxicity because it helped to "instill trust":

They can come and talk to me when they need to and also teaching them to be able to go to each other and talk openly with each other, especially if there's a concern. Not to just avoid it or let it go, but to be able to go to each other and voice that concern and know that the other one is going to take it as constructive criticism.

Three participants or 30%, including L6, also said it was crucial to have policies and procedures to reduce workplace toxicity. According to L6, department directors had a

policy that "they must contact with the teachers at least once a month and then that contact, they must have asked him, asked them if they have any issues or problems to discuss." As L6 said, when such a communication-based policy was not used, it could foster a toxic environment:

It's a simple policy, but it's often not done. What happens when it's not there is promptly [toxicity] will grow and grow and grow and fester and it spreads to other people. But if at least once a month, every leader, every director's going to every teacher saying, are there any issues in your classroom? Anything I can help you with?

For L4, the policies and procedures that helped reduce workplace toxicity were a combination of the organization's mission statement, as well as basic regulations and rules: "We have one here which is our mission statement. A lot of employers would start with something like that which basically should summarize about what their goal, the goal of the corporation or the organization that you work for." In addition to that mission statement, L4 said, "You have rules and policies in place that should specify certain employment things that should be upheld," as well as a reporting system for those individuals who do not uphold those policies. As L4 continued, "They should be keeping track of any incidents where the person is not following through not following protocol or not following procedures or has had any interpersonal in disruptions with others." This could be done through a chain of command where you have certain people that you have to go through certain channels to prevent problems. In other words, you don't go right to the top unless you have somebody right. You have to follow a certain protocol.

L4 saw this approach as useful "for any business that hires anybody" because "people are human after all and there you have to have these kind of, at least basic safeguards, in place to ensure that you have some kind of organization."

L5 also said there should be specified



chain of command to help reduce workplace toxicity: “Just reiterating chain of command. First, go to the person that you have, the bottom one, that you can resolve it that way. Then go to your supervisor and not go to a fellow coworker.” Such an approach was useful, according to L5, because “it eliminates unrest in the workplace and eliminates gossip and eliminates a breakdown.”

Two more participants, or 20%, including L6, once again, discussed the need for a community-based culture in the work environment. According to L6, the open communication could often be achieved by creating a work culture:

A lot of this can be structured. You can structure certain kinds of meetings, certain kinds of at these organizations. Culture. I have a number of those regular meetings so that people don't get too far apart, but beyond that, you have to have a culture of mutual respect for one another and communicating the right way.

For L10, the culture of the work environment should be collegial and fun, which led to outside of work activities: “We would go to Karaoke in the summer. I like to work with people. I don't want to scream and say that I'm your boss.”

**Leadership Behaviors Toward Toxicity**

The final theme to emerge from the research questions and data was leadership behaviors toward toxicity. In this major theme, participants explained the specific actions that they took to help address a toxic work environment. In this theme, there were three subthemes: mitigating toxic individuals, adapting behaviors, and modeling nontoxic behaviors as a leader.

**Mitigating toxic individuals.** The first subtheme was mitigating toxic individuals, in which participants described how they helped alleviate the toxicity of individual employees. The responses given in this subtheme are presented in Table 2 (one participant did not respond).

Table 2

Action	Number of	Percentage of total participants
Resolution one-on-one or in department	3	30%
Positivity	3	30%
Accountability	2	20%
Empathy	1	10%

*Actions to Mitigate Toxic Individuals*

Three participants or 30% said that they could find resolution with toxic individuals either one-on one or in the department. L5 said the following:

I guess I would say try to find a good resolution. First, I would try to do one on one. I think that if it's a problem that is just between myself and the person, it would be one on one, but if it's a problem with myself in that group, I think I would first do one on one just to let them know that I would like them to meet with the room and then the department will be after that so that they're prepared and that they know that I want the department to speak with them.

L7 also said it depended on the situation: “I have dealt with things both ways. One on one I think is most effective, but both parties have to be agreeable that they want to work toward improving things.” For L9, given the nature of his position as a lawyer, most resolution was done one-on-one. L9 said that when it came time to mediate a case in a toxic environment, the mediation was not easy because the lawyer and the client were not coming from the same place: “The expectations of the client are different from the realities.” Given the individual nature, resolution must occur in the client/attorney relationship.

Three other participants or 30% cited positivity as essential in behaviors to mitigate toxic individuals. For L3, this positivity occurred through the building of relationships: “I always try to be positive and build networks between people who are having difficulty working together.” L4 said that positivity should be rooted in respect:

I would use to avoid those situations by being respectful, even though the person who's



being toxic by showing that you have a positive outlook on something and that you know that they're bad. Sometimes you have to come back and say something positive about that person... Just steer them away from their negativity, get them on a more positive subject.

L10 also said positivity was an important behavior, but specifically said the idea of morale, and bringing the workers together, was crucial to mitigating toxic individuals:

The biggest issue is morale. We have to paint things rosy. We have to show the picture of paradise. Before we moved to the building, we're in now, everyone was on one floor. It was a big happy family there. We did a good job this week. We were allowed to go home an hour early and we were paid for that hour. We'd have Chocolate Wednesdays and ice cream Thursdays, and it would come over the PA system that we could have a 15-minute break because the ice cream truck was here. They brought burgers and hot dogs for a party and we took an hour for lunch today.

Two other participants spoke to the need for accountability. L2 said the following: I don't let things slide, if you will. I've had situations where I've observed similar toxic behavior and once again, I will circle back and address it with people in a confrontational manner, usually one on one so that they don't feel as if they're being put on the spot, but at the same time I challenged them and hold them accountable. Don't let it slide. If I do witness something that I think could be a defined as toxic, I don't let it go. I will address it with them and they know that.

L1 also said accountability, albeit in a more public manner, given the public nature of her job, was a crucial behavior. In this instance, L1 used a public rebuke as a way to mitigate a toxic individual:

The last situation has finally resulted in my saying there will be a public declaration made if this happens again and it's very public because it's on cable TV. And so that sounds

like a threat, but it's not. I've tried very quietly, probably 20 times in the past two years to say you cannot do that in public now. But we have a non-public sessions that are protected by law and we can have conversations although you have to be very careful with is not everything... The reason I finally got to her I did was that nothing else had worked, but I do believe that a public rebuke would have an impact. And I think that hopefully that will contribute to a slight change in the behavior.

Finally, L6 said that while the specific behaviors might change depending on the particular toxic individual, all behavior to mitigate that toxicity should be grounded in empathy:

There are so many different settings, so many different contexts for this kind of leadership, but all of them would develop empathy. The quality of perceiving how the other person feels as much as possible. We make the other person we know fairly heavy felt; to some extent we can try to read the other person and see what's causing the problem...Once you perceive that what they're feeling and then the techniques become clear, we proceed from there. It may be that they have not

been receiving enough recognition or perhaps overworked, perhaps not given enough support outside of the workplace. Sometimes just saying, I can see how that would upset you. That statement alone right there, you're halfway toward solve the problem.

**Adapting behaviors.** The second subtheme in this third major theme was adapting behaviors, which explored how and when leaders knew to and could adapt or transform their behaviors to help mitigate toxicity. There was only one category in which more than participant agreed, and that was in knowing one's audience. Four participants or 40% said knowing their employees and colleagues helped them in using that knowledge to adapt and change their behaviors for and to the individual. L7 said, "Sometimes, there's no



choice. You have to adapt. And I mean this style depends on the coworkers attitudes.” L1 said adaptation was a function of understanding others:

Simply knowing who I'm talking to, because I do know the 12 people that work with me and I can almost guess 100 percent how they're going to view in general a topic that we're going to be faced with. It's a matter of deciding whether or not in some cases some of these folks need a level of detail that will require me taking staff to help explain something. And the other folks you just need to say this is a good idea...So it really goes back to the relationship side of things.

L4 also said all the differences that individuals had were important to adapting: You just know that everybody's going to have different personalities and you may have to be a little bit more understanding to certain individuals and they may just be the type who can easily be negative, so you have to kind of be good out of your way to be positive in dealing with them. It may not be a case where they're going to lay down, but you just might have to put a little bit more effort into working with them, what you say, how you say it to them and just kind of be willing to listen and try to keep them focused on what they're supposed to be doing.

L4 continued by saying that often individuals have things going on in their personal lives that could affect their work performance, and knowing those things could help a leader adapt their behavior:

If you say this isn't bad because and then all of a sudden performing really badly, then we have no idea what's going on. Let him find out that someone had a child and I'm dealing with the cancer thing. Having a compassionate heart and you know, again, trying to help this person maintain their employment.

The remaining participants all had different ways of adapting their behaviors toward toxic individuals. For L2, it was employing progressive discipline:

Usually, it comes down to a case of progressive discipline through a performance evaluation process. And if they just don't stop to correct and move away from the toxic behavior, then you through progressive discipline, ratchet up the consequences to mentally they leave the organization or they're fired the process for it. . . . Meaning all the way from a verbal warning up to termination and this steps in between. You always want to put employees on notice if you have concerns and document documented and give them every opportunity to correct their performance and their behavior.

The remaining participants all had different ways of adapting their behavior. For L3, it was using humor: “Instead of fighting back, I have learned to relax the situation with humorous satire.” Conversely, L5 tried to remain neutral and “take a kind of a behind the scenes approach and be that go between workers and their supervisor. So I'm being a neutral party.” For L6, adaptation was about seeking outside advice:

You want to get counsel if you have a board of directors or somebody above you. When I tried to get their counsel, when you do the heavy stuff, because we're human leaders, again, we may be influenced by the passions of the moment and we make mistakes. The Bible says in the multitude of counselors there is safety. **Modeling nontoxic behaviors as a leader.** The final subtheme of the third major themes was the ways leaders modeled nontoxic behaviors. Eight out of the 10 or 80% of participants said that they wanted to be transparent, open, and vulnerable, allowing others to know not only what was happening, but feeling comfortable coming to the leader and seeing that the leader was not perfect. L2 said this was open communication that included vulnerability and awareness:

I show my vulnerability by sharing concerns I have with decisions I am struggling with, I share when I feel like I have underperformed or made a bad decision, etc. It comes



back to communication. I try to model that behavior, you know, communicate openly, clearly. No surprises, don't ambush people, make sure that they are fully aware of any concerns and that have every opportunity to share concerns that they may have with me without the negative consequences.

For L3, this behavior was accessibility and accountability:

I am a people person. I always have an open-door policy. I always try to be accessible. Strong leaders form the patterns for the organization's behavior. It is a matter of being a fair leader... Sometimes I have to tell myself that I am leader and I messed up. Sometimes I have to recognize that I have not done the best to solve the situation.

Similarly, L5 spoke about the traits of approachability and accessibility. Part of these traits were to show vulnerability about mistakes and limitations, as well: I first I tell my teachers that anytime you have a problem or concern, please don't hesitate to come to me. And please come right away. The sooner the better of the better, we can deal with it and make sure it doesn't become a bigger problem. I always tell them that if you have a concern or a complaint about me, I want you tell me. I know I'm not perfect and I want you to be able to come to me and know that you can come to me and tell me about it. I realize that I'm privileged and sometimes I present myself in such a way that I know what I'm thinking, but I need them all to you as being too abrupt or too or something. And I just, you know, telling them in advance that I know that I'm not perfect and I know I make mistakes, so don't feel that you can't come to me. I try to reassure them that they can come to me with an album even if the problem is me and bring it to my attention.

L6 also said showing vulnerability by not always being right:

You don't have to be superman. You don't have to have the answers all the time, like I always had the right answers. Nobody can do that. Then you can let them know that you care

and let them know that you love. I think so, especially if it's true. If it's friendly, whereas you can't just pretend that you love them, you have to really love.

In addition, L5 tried to always have an approachable open-door policy:

Mostly, I just try to make sure that my posture, my attitude and my responses are all displaying that I'm approachable so that they won't ever been like, oh, well she looks mad and I don't want to talk to her right now. She's really hearing about she was a good time and tried to talk to her and she just shut me down and she wouldn't listen. I try to make sure that none of those things happen. I want them to know that at any given time they need help they can come and I'll be up under open door policy.

In a similar way, L4 described modeling listening and approachability:

I try to get listen to my subordinates. I feel that if I've helped somebody by being a good listener rather than wanting to listen to everything or not, that's something and I hope that I have helped some people by being that way. They can let off steam or just discuss something and try to maybe give some advice. . . . I try to hear people out. Like I said, if I feel that I can offer any kind of advice or, or at least just say, I'll pray for you. If I can't do anything else, you know, sometimes that's all somebody needs to hear is something like that. . . . I would like to think that I am a compassionate leader. Somebody who was willing to listen. Um, leads by example. I didn't really believe you lead by example lead by saying one thing, but I want you to be this very, but you yourself acts a different way. I think you have to read, you know, the way you want people to act, you should show them that's by just what you do and hopefully they'll follow suit. That's why. That's my philosophy on it.

L7 also said there was a need to be approachable saying, "I find that it's important to always be friendly, approachable, and professional. . . . What I do have to interact with them was always with a smile, professional



attitude, friendly.” For L1, the leadership trait was characterized as transparency:

I think a straightforward and transparent style and respect for others and an understanding that people can see things differently is critically important to how I get to majority votes on the things that I’m asking folks that represent the city to do. I also think it’s really important that our staff and our staff...I guess I would say that for the most part I’m very seldom see reasons why somebody shouldn’t hear the entire story. It’s hard to figure out a reason why you would want to withhold information and, and if you want to withhold information then I think you need to think really long and hard about what you’re talking about because you know, these are, these are adults, you know, they lived their lives, they’ve got families, they’ve got grandkids. I mean the drive cars, you know, followed stop signs. These are all just people. So I would always question if I felt. And that’s why I think I am incredibly transparent because I don’t presume that I have anything to hide and I don’t presume the person I’m talking to does it.

**CUNCLUSION**

Researchers have determined that leaders can influence worker wellbeing and working environments (Mathieu et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2016; Tse & Chiu, 2014). Bell (2017) concluded that 78% of participants had been negatively impacted in some way by working under toxic leadership. The general problem is that negative leaders are negatively affecting the wellbeing and work performance of their employees. When a work environment contains toxic elements, the wellbeing of employees can be compromised (Galupo & Resnick, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to develop a deeper understanding of how leaders selected and applied specific strategies and behaviors in nontoxic workplace environments. This study was specifically focused on a population of

leaders from government and nongovernment institutions in the state of New Hampshire.

I collected data from 10 participants in New Hampshire using a purposive sampling technique and semistructured, in-depth interviews. After transcript review and member checking, I inputted the interview data into NVivo to compare and analyze data from all interview transcripts entered for recurring themes. I coded these themes according to how these answers connected to a specific research question and collated findings across the various interviews to form the final results of the study. The remainder of the chapter contains a summary of the overall study, a summary of the findings and conclusions, recommendations for future research and practice, and a final section on implications derived from the study.

**Summary of Findings and Conclusion**

RQ1: What leadership approaches and best practices do effective, nontoxic leaders apply to reduce toxicity?

In many ways, the results of this study reinforced the current literature; specific findings also contradicted the extant literature, offering new information on toxic leadership. For example, with the first major theme, participants explained the ways their experiences with toxic leaders had influenced their leadership style currently. For most participants, this process meant the modeling of behavior that they would not themselves model and doing the opposite of what the toxic leader did. Such results coincided with Baronce (2015), who suggested that certain personalities could counter toxicity through their positive behaviors. L7 said that her reaction to past toxic leadership was “to keep a positive attitude, to not let my discouragement show around my coworkers, to deal with them in a professional manner.” In this way, L7 demonstrated what Fraher (2016) and Holder and Nadal (2016) argued was a productive way to maintain their wellbeing, assist others in maintaining theirs, and positively contribute to the company when



dealing with a toxic leader.

These same results challenged the literature that dealt with the influence of toxic leadership. According to Starr-Glass (2017), not only do leaders dictate the atmosphere of the work environment through their leadership style, such as authoritarian versus transformational, but they also provide an indication to their subordinates about what is acceptable and unacceptable in their departments or the larger organization. In other words, if leaders act in unethical ways, commit microaggressions, show favoritism, or demonstrate other such behavior or attitudes, either their followers will begin exhibiting the same traits and attitudes, or they will suffer increased levels of stress due to the need to counteract the negatives (Alvarado, 2016; Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). Such an influence was not found by the results of this study. Instead, The experience of toxic leadership influenced the leaders in this study to not act and behave as they witnessed the toxic leader doing. As L2 said,

It influenced my work style that it gave me examples of bad management, bad performance to not do myself. I guess I would say that it comes to me back when I experienced it taught me not to do the same as a leader.

There was more congruence between the approaches leaders took to mitigate toxic individuals and overall reduce the toxic work environment. Both the results of this study and the extant literature showed the need for the positivity of a leader. As Fraher (2016) argued, toxic or nontoxic behaviors filtered down from the top, so leaders should employ positive leadership styles (Field, 2014). The participants in this study concurred, citing positivity as essential in countering and changing toxic individuals. For L3, this positivity was through the building of relationships: “I always try to be positive and build networks between people who are having difficulty working together.” L4 said that positivity should be rooted in a positive

outlook on individuals.

The way leaders in this study approached toxic individuals was also consistent with the literature. Field (2014) noted that workers and/or leaders might face conflict regarding broken expectations that could lead to negativity. If leaders effectively and timeously addressed such negativity, they could avoid workplace toxicity (Day et al., 2014). Participants overwhelmingly agreed that addressing the toxic individual—either through conversation or directly addressing the issue—was their preferred approach. By addressing these issues swiftly and openly, the participants avoided the toxic work environments derived from toxic attitudes remaining unaddressed or escalating conflicts being ignored (see Moore et al., 2015). By allowing for a conversation, as four of the 10 participants did, leaders provided their workers with opportunities to voice their grievances and concerns in order to address individual worker bad behaviors and attitudes as quickly as possible (Laschinger et al., 2014).

RQ2: What leadership behaviors and best practices do effective, nontoxic leaders apply to reduce toxicity?

In the second research question, there were two main areas of congruence between the results of this study and the extant literature. The first was with the concept of undoing toxic leadership. As Erickson et al. (2017) argued, leaders stepping into a toxic environment due to predecessor’s negative approaches or other factors might need to employ nontoxic leadership strategies to improve or counteract the toxic leanings of workers and the general environment. This finding corresponded with the results of this study, which indicated that eight of the 10 participants (80%) described the need to undo previous toxic leadership. While the literature did not outline these strategies, the participants of this study did so by making it clear that the old leadership was gone and the new leadership was going to do things differently. Primarily, this was achieved through an open communication process.





The second area of similarity between the results of this study and the extant literature was the use of modeling nontoxic behavior. Eisenbeiß and Brodbeck (2013) proposed that it was a leader's role and responsibility to model desired behavior to followers, as well as to establish the kind of culture the business wishes to maintain. Padilla et al. (2007) argued that in this way, followers took their cues from leaders; if a leader portrayed toxic behavior, such as being unethical in their dealings or showing favoritism to some employees while bullying others, highly susceptible followers would begin to portray similar behaviors (Baronce, 2015; Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2013). Given this cause-and-effect correlation, the participants in this study believed modeling nontoxic behavior was crucial.

The type of nontoxic behavior that was modeled by the participants in this study aligned with the literature. Hadadian and Zarei (2016), Green (2014), and Mathieu et al. (2014) found leaders with narcissistic qualities could develop toxicity in a workplace. In addition, the real or perceived leader backlash to voicing concerns or providing alternatives often expressed by workers experiencing leaders' authoritarian or fundamentalist "my way or the highway" approach to management (Cotton, 2016; Padilla et al., 2007). Such fear and lack of positive leader-member exchanges could also negatively influence overall department or company performance and continue a toxic cycle in the workplace (Bell, 2017; Peng et al., 2014). The literature advocated that leaders should attempt to provide workers with an environment where their voices would be heard and respected (Hewlett, 2016) so they would not be afraid to voice their opinions or offer solutions due to potential backlash from their toxic leader (Peng et al., 2014). This finding supported the behaviors modeled by the participants in this study; eight out of the 10 participants (80%) said they wanted to remain transparent, open, and vulnerable; allowing others to know not only what was happening but

to feel comfortable coming to the leader and see the leader was not perfect. In this way, leaders modeled an approachable, open, and transparent leader/follower model, allowing worker voices to be heard and not centering the leader over the workers.

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