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Toxic leadership: Managerial implications for tourism and hospitality business

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Executive Summary: There is growing attention on research about dysfunctional management issues, specifically regarding toxic leadership, which lead to deleterious consequences in business. When a leader enacts toxic behaviors rather than providing support and realistic directions, it will cause severe stress, burnout, and passive-aggressive dynamics on their team, negatively affecting guest experiences. Therefore, this transactional paper aims at developing managers' awareness of the toxic leadership issue, enlightening how to recognize and detect it. Also, to contribute to reducing job stress and promoting mental health at the workplace, we suggest some recommendations on how companies can handle the toxic leadership phenomenon by enhancing a people-oriented culture, which is vital in the tourism and hospitality realms.

KEYWORDS: *toxic leadership; dysfunctional leadership; job stress; human resources engagement*

As a transactional paper, the purpose is to enhance managers' awareness of a cutting-edge issue, toxic leadership, in an agile format presenting a synthesis of reliable academic studies and discussing in an actionable way some best practices on how companies can handle it.

Toxic leadership

Academic studies agree in defining toxic leadership as a form of dysfunctional

management due to a leader's disruptive attitude and behaviors towards their employees, causing severe stress and burnout at workplace, poor performance and ruining the quality of guest services (Carle, 2023a; Gallo, 2023; Kets de Vries, 2014; Kets de Vries, 2019; Lipman-Blumen, 2010; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Northouse, 2016; Padilla et al., 2007; Williams, 1994, 2002).

Common signs of toxic leadership behaviors are: a) publicly presenting a false smile and

fake support usually to hide the actual attitude of devaluing and blaming workers' capacities; b) ignoring contributions of others, or approving only those ideas that are similar to the leader's personal interests; c) publicly humiliating subordinates; d) manipulating facts and communication to get personal advantages while diminishing the values of others; e) and abusing the power of authority to hinder employee performance, progress, or career advancement (Gallo, 2023; Kets de Vries, 2019; Lipman-Blumen, 2005)

Toxic leadership is associated with disruptive attitudes that cause severe conditions of daily stress and staff burnout (anxiety, panic attacks, depression, impulse deregulation, sleeping disorders), as well as cognitive and behavioral disorders (impaired capacity to focus on and to complete job tasks, poor creativity, and problem-solving, disengagement). Additionally, the employee's motivation to work, the feeling of attachment and devotion to the company, and the willingness to collaborate are diminished (Carle, 2023a, 2023b; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014; Northouse, 2016; Padilla et al., 2007) Studies also indicate that when employees feel disconnected due to the prolonged experience of being mistreated at the workplace, they tend to behave with passive-aggressive dysfunctional attitudes or leave the company.

Moreover, stressful job situations caused by toxic leaders may have deleterious consequences for the company (Cavelzani, 2012; Kets de Vries, 2014; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021), such as: a) dealing with lawsuits and financial refunds due to mental

injuries and illness produced by abusive and mistreating behaviors in the workplace; b) turnover-related issues (wasting time and money to select and train new candidates; delays of service and overload for the existing staff until new resources are hired); c) bad reputation of the company brand as a negative place to work.

Furthermore, and significantly in the hospitality and tourism business where guests' satisfaction depends considerably on the quality of service provided by the workers, toxic leadership drives stressed workers to have rude and careless interactions with customers, creating negative vicious circles: as much the customers complain and review negatively the employee's low quality of service, as the toxic manager will then use such evidence to justify and legitimate their actions of continuously blaming the subordinate.

On the other side, it's not easy to detect such dysfunctional management for several reasons (Carle, 2023b; Cavelzani, 2012; Gallo, 2023; Kets de Vries, 2014; Kets de Vries, 2019; Northouse, 2016): toxic managers usually have high intelligence and are capable of achieving results, so they easily get promoted to leadership positions. Also, they are smart communicators and able to influence others, particularly by manipulating facts for personal sake, while devaluing potential competitors and colleagues. Similar to chameleons, abusive managers tend to find and live in niche or vacant areas of business where other colleagues do not have much expertise and knowledge; consequently, they can exercise their own commanding authority and influence without being criticized.

Furthermore, toxic leaders usually intimidate their own subordinates, who tend then to become reticent and lose their ability to voice opinions.

On a side note, to understand the psychopathology of such disruptive and abusive behaviors, it must be acknowledged that toxic managers usually suffer from severe personality disorders that are mostly the consequences of traumatic experiences that occurred in their past, such as having grown up with parents with disorganized attachments, having experienced prolonged domestic violence, or neglecting interactions during childhood (Beebe & Lachmann, 2005; Tronick, 2007). In some other cases (or in addition to the previous factors), they may have been shocked by recent traumatic events; for instance, related to the COVID-19 pandemic (like having lost a family member dying alone in a hospital during the lockdown, or having being in intensive care unit for prolonged time), or experiencing the consequences of geopolitics wars, or suffering family conflicts, or financial breakdown or other stressful events ending with severe emotional injuries and burnout, turning potentially good people into ones with personality disorders.

Consequently, psychological support, compassion, and care should be offered to such managers rather than blaming or firing them a priori, to transform a bad situation at the workplace into a new developmental opportunity to heal and change.

Managerial implications in the hospitality and tourism business

In the hospitality and tourism business, guest satisfaction depends considerably on the employees' capacity to provide an empathic service through recognizing, addressing, and even anticipating customers' needs, or by regulating and soothing guests' negative moods, while sometimes attending to demanding personalities. This is only possible under the (obvious) conditions where workers feel respected by their manager rather than threatened, supported rather than devalued, and respected rather than mistrusted. On the contrary, a toxic manager destroys the subordinates' passion and motivation to work, as well as their engagement to be part of the business or company, ultimately driving the staff and the company to negative outcomes.

Even in departments not directly interacting with guests, any mistakes, misunderstandings, delays, and dysfunctional behaviors enacted by abused and mistreated staff will undermine guests' positive experiences as well as the company's reputation. For instance, in the kitchens, an operator who is mistreated by a toxic manager tends to make more errors or delays in food preparation, increasing the risks of ruining dinners; or, neglected housekeepers will tend to adopt passive-aggressive dysfunctional attitudes, such as making acrimonious comments such as "how crazy is working in this place with this insane boss!" regardless of being in earshot of guests.

Therefore, it's fundamental that all company employees become aware that toxic leadership demolishes workers' capacities, and consequently stressed staff

tend to display negative moods and attitudes while interacting with customers and are very likely to adopt a rude and careless manner whilst serving clients.

In the attempt to increase awareness and enhance the ability to detect and treat such types of stress and toxic managers, some recommendations based on the review of relevant research are presented below:

- 1) To provide human resources managers, line managers, and executive leaders with specific training about the toxic leadership issue and in general, on dysfunctional management, group unconscious dynamics, job stress, and burnout, to be able to recognize such phenomena and arrange support. For example, training should include personality disorders at the workplace and the consequences of activating team conflicts and job stress (i.e. narcissistic, histrionic, paranoid, passive-aggressive, toxic, and controlling personalities). In addition to focusing on the individual level, training should also address how teams and groups may tend to behave out of consciousness when under pressure (i.e. in passive-aggressive modalities), as such unconscious dynamics drive people to disengagement, mistrust and hostility against the company (Cavelzani & Williams, 2013; Kets de Vries, 2014;

Williams, 2002). Psychoanalytic consultants should conduct these specific trainings.

- 2) To establish, or improve, a people-oriented organizational culture, where employees can feel a sense of belonging to the company. Also, voicing without the fear of repercussions, and being respectfully listened to when business-related problems as well as personal difficulties arise (for example, to balance work and family obligations; to focus on job tasks and to perform due to a loss; to collaborate and integrate personalities or cultural differences with colleagues) Therefore, human resources managers and line managers should actively and constantly maintain a dialogue with their staff to monitor mental health conditions, rather than intervening only upon receiving formal complaints.

More widely, in a people-oriented organizational culture, employees can strongly identify with the organization's vision and mission, so that they can act united over a shared mission. This culture fosters a collaborative, family-like environment by valuing participation (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2003; Groysberg et al., 2018; Ngoc Su et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be advised that a people-

- oriented culture should be implemented not only by big or established brands but also by small hotel and restaurant businesses.
- 3) To provide specific training to line managers and executive leaders to improve stress-coping strategies by enhancing their emotional intelligence skills. For example, leaders could, in the first instance take first an EQ inventory (emotional quotient), then additional training to develop their emotional intelligence skills, particularly empathy, self-consciousness, and self-control.
- In addition, training should cover the conflict management topic at the workplace, undertaking for example, the widely known Thomas-Kilman Conflict Inventory (Shell, 2001) to then develop the related skills to better regulate tensions and the negative attitudes causing job stress. Also, some relevant adaptive versus dysfunctional coping scales should be considered and trained (Folkman et al., 1986): for example, seeking social support, self-controlling, and positive reappraisal are considered effective stress-coping strategies, in contrast with escape-avoidance, distancing, and confronting modalities.
- 4) To establish regular coaching sessions and supportive supervision for line managers and executive leaders to ensure they are not alone and overwhelmed by emotional labor or stressful personal issues (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022; Straus et al., 2022).
 - 5) To provide psychological support to employees as well as managers (Cavelzani, 2023; Couser et al., 2020), for example offering several free and confidential sessions per year to workers who may need to prevent and treat, particularly job-stress problems, organizational violence, and bullying. The psychologist may also work in a consultative role with line managers, supervisors, and leaders to address organizational challenges. As part of employee assistance programs EPA, psychological support could alternatively be included in health insurance packages offered as a bonus for employees.
 - 6) As a supplementary prevention measure, it can be suggested to carefully select candidates by assessing their personality with scientific instruments (preferably undertaken by clinical psychologists who have specific backgrounds) to reduce the risks of hiring disruptive managers: in addition to considering the

candidate’s skills, experience and education, assessing also the new leader’s personality helps to ensure congruence of values and attitudes between the company

culture and vision, and the newly hired leader.

	Managerial Recommendation	Reference
1	<i>Training to recognize and manage toxic leadership, and other dysfunctional management styles causing job stress and burnout</i>	<i>Cavelzani & Williams, 2013; Kets de Vries, 2014; Williams, 2002</i>
2	<i>Developing a people-oriented organizational culture</i>	<i>Bruch & Ghoshal, 2003; Groysberg et al., 2018; Ngoc Su et al., 2021</i>
3	<i>Training to learn stress-coping strategies and emotional intelligence</i>	<i>Folkman et al., 1986; Shell, 2001</i>
4	<i>Establishing regular coaching sessions and supportive supervision</i>	<i>Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022; Straus et al., 2022</i>
5	<i>Providing psychological support</i>	<i>Cavelzani, 2023; Couser et al., 2020</i>
6	<i>Selecting candidates by personality tests</i>	

Conclusion

To conclude, the proposed managerial implications aim at enhancing the people-oriented organizational culture, which is vital in the tourism and hospitality business, through developing awareness of the toxic leadership issue. Also, it aims to enhance mental health, engagement, and mutual support in the workplace.

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