

The Crushing Costs of Toxicity: A Literature Review of the Value of Organizational Support on Toxicity

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How to cite this paper: Belanger, K. (2026). The Crushing Costs of Toxicity: A Literature Review of the Value of Organizational Support on Toxicity. *Open Journal of Business and Management*, 14, 1265-1271. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2026.143072>

Received: February 7, 2026

Accepted: March 29, 2026

Published: April 1, 2026

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Abstract

Bullying, incivility, and toxic leadership are elements of toxicity in the workplace that create severe psychological and economic costs on both organizations and their employees. This literature review synthesizes 20 studies published between 2000 and 2024 to examine the costs of toxic workplaces and the mitigating roles of organizational culture and perceived organizational support. Drawing on Equity Theory and Affective Events Theory, this review explains how workplace toxicity influences employee engagement, intentions to leave, and well-being through cognitive and affective mechanisms. The findings indicate that increased health-related issues, reduced productivity, and higher turnover rates are directly tied to toxic environments. On the other hand, the findings indicate that organizational support structures are associated with mitigating negative outcomes. This review advances the understanding of toxic workplace mitigation by organizing fragmented findings into a theoretically grounded framework.

Keywords

Toxicity, Organizational Support, Organizational Structure, Human Resources, Workplace Management

1. Introduction

Workplace toxicity is a relatively new concern in contemporary organizational research, as toxic workplaces were previously broadly defined as “bad jobs”. Today, it is widely acknowledged that a wide range of workplace behaviors can negatively impact employees. Toxic environments can be characterized by the presence of bullying, negativity, rude behavior, incivility, and other negative traits

in the workplace. [Salin et al. \(2020\)](#) defined workplace bullying in Western cultures as continuous, harmful behavior that can cause humiliation, offense, reduced performance, and decreased productivity in the targeted individual. As organizations increasingly face reduced retention and higher competition for new talent, they can no longer afford to look the other way regarding the work environment.

Organizational support for employees can be a significant mitigating factor in combating the negative impacts of workplace toxicity. The purpose of this literature review is to examine current research on the intersection of toxicity and organizational culture and organizational support to identify any mitigation, if any, for the impacts of toxicity. Drawing on Adam's Equity Theory and Affective Event Theory, this article explores how positive organizational characteristics may reduce the impact of workplace toxicity on employees. By integrating these theories, this review seeks to provide a model for understanding employees' vulnerability to toxicity and how companies can combat its effects, while offering insight into red flags to help reduce its presence in the workplace.

While prior research has documented the harmful effects of toxicity in the workplace, the findings remain fragmented across constructs such as bullying, incivility, and toxic leadership. This limited synthesis integrates cognitive and affective mechanisms within a unified explanatory theoretical framework. This review addresses the gap by organizing empirical findings through established theoretical lenses and examining how organizational support and culture mitigate the negative outcomes of workplace toxicity.

1.1. Methodology

This analysis utilized an integrative literature review approach to synthesize empirical research on toxicity in the workplace and organizational support. ProQuest and the University of the Cumberland's Library database were used to search for peer-reviewed multidisciplinary journals. Search terms included "toxicity in the workplace", "toxic leadership", "workplace bullying", "incivility", "organizational support", "organizational culture", and "employee well-being". The search focused on peer-reviewed journals that were published between 2004 and 2024. Studies were included if they examined toxic traits in the workplace and reported empirical findings related to employee outcomes, and, if present, to mitigation through organizational behaviors. Opinion pieces, non-empirical commentaries, and toxicity outside of the workplace were excluded from this study. A full-text analysis was used to screen all articles to ensure relevance. After the screening, approximately 20 articles met the inclusion criteria and were assessed to identify theoretical linkages and patterns in their findings.

1.2. Defining Toxicity

Toxicity in the workplace can be defined in many different ways. [Salin et al. \(2020\)](#) defined workplace bullying as acts towards the targeted victim of humiliation, of-

fense, distress, work interference, and creating hostile environments. This definition is not specified to the title of the individual and can include supervisors, colleagues, and employees. [Gandolfi and Stone \(2022\)](#) explained that toxic leadership can include dysfunction, intimidation, bullying, micromanaging, narcissism, unethical behavior, hostility, aggression, and shaming. The power dynamics can accentuate the feelings of negativity in the workplace due to the power dynamics at play. [Anjum and Ming \(2018\)](#) noted that toxic workplaces increase conflict, increase stress, lower productivity, and can have a domino effect, causing organizational dysfunction. Workplace bullying is only one facet of toxicity. General negativity, incivility, and rude behavior, while not outright bullying, can be considered toxic acts that contribute to a toxic work environment. Toxicity can fester, causing deeper levels of negative impacts in the workplace than can be seen in interpersonal conflict between two people.

1.3. The Costs of Toxicity

Research has linked exposure to toxic workplaces with increased stress, physical health degradation, and mental health conditions. [Sull et al. \(2022\)](#) estimated that, in 2008, U.S. companies' healthcare costs due to toxic workplaces totaled \$16 billion. These estimates reflect direct medical and health insurance-related costs and do not include absenteeism or other indirect productivity losses. [Kocakulah et al. \(2016\)](#) estimated \$200 billion in annual costs from job stress, with as many as 6.5 million sick days per year. [Bhandarker and Rai \(2019\)](#) recommended analyzing quick-result leaders, as their study found that toxic leaders were quick in getting results, but at the cost of their employees' well-being.

Toxic workplaces are strongly associated with reduced productivity, lower engagement, and reduced performance. [Gumbus and Lyons \(2011\)](#) found that costs for an organization include lost productivity, turnover, lower work output by witnesses due to distraction, impacts to health, lawsuits, and disability claims due to workplace bullying. These productivity losses occur even with staff present at the workplace. [Osler \(2021\)](#) estimated the cost of absenteeism in higher education alone at \$7000 per year per employee.

Organizations that fail to address workplace toxicity report higher turnover rates. [Reyhanoglu and Akin \(2022\)](#) found that organizations that are silent on toxic behaviors experience higher turnover rates. Increased turnover leads to greater costs in finding, hiring, and training new talent. Toxicity is expensive, and it can be reduced or avoided with proper organizational stewardship.

2. Organizational Stewardship as Mitigation

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Equity Theory posits that employees evaluate the balance between their efforts, emotional labor, and tolerance of negative behaviors to the outputs of compensation, recognition, and support. [Hattangadi \(2019\)](#) explained that J. Stacey Adams' Equity Theory was essentially a balancing test performed by employees to measure

whether a job was worth the effort by analyzing the effort it took versus the reward received. Toxic workplaces increase the inputs of emotional labor and tolerance of negative behavior without the corresponding rewards, increasing perceptions of inequity.

The Affective Events Theory explains how workplace events can trigger responses that shape the attitudes and behaviors of the employee. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) construct the Affective Event Theory, which shows that an employee's emotional state influences job satisfaction. Toxic events such as bullying, incivility, or aggressive leadership generate negative reactions, such as frustration, anxiety, or even anger. This is bolstered by the findings of Anjum and Ming (2018), who found that toxic environments lead to decreased productivity, lowered job performance, and employees wanting to leave the company. Repeated exposure to such events is associated with reduced engagement, diminished job satisfaction, and a higher likelihood of employee turnover.

2.2. Organizational Culture

The organizational culture in a company influences the overall organizational climate. Grojean et al. (2004) explained that the climate is the environment as the shared perceptions of the workplace. Toxic activity in the workplace can harm the culture of the organization. Tyler et al. (2016) noted that humans have an inherent drive to feel a sense of belonging, and toxic environments where negative social cues are present affect individuals more quickly and severely than positive work environments. Berberoglu (2018) discovered that climate is directly related to commitment and perceptions of organizational performance. Rasool et al. (2021) found that culture and employee well-being mitigated toxicity effects that impacted employees.

2.3. Organizational Support

Even if the organization has bad actors, the overarching culture and support network within the organization can ease the effects of toxicity. Kahya and Sahin (2018) found that when followers perceive a positive relationship, their performance increases, and they become more willing to take on additional responsibility. Having strong leaders who allow employees to thrive independently of the leader's gaze creates an environment of trust and fosters an increased sense of pride in their contributions to the workplace. On the other hand, Borden et al. (2018) conducted a study that found employees who perceive their organization as supportive are less likely to hold unfavorable views of negative feedback from a bullying leader. So even if bad actors are present, the associate stress and tension is mitigated through a supportive organization. Berberoglu (2018) explained that employees who are given more independent work with accountability and responsibility are more likely to be committed to the business. Companies with robust support systems can mitigate the negative effects of workplace toxicity.

3. Discussion

3.1. Findings

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated significant associations between toxic workplaces and negative employee outcomes. Rasool et al. (2021) noted that even when toxicity is present, the effects are blunted by a supportive work environment, enhancing the employee's sense of well-being. In the study, the results found there was a significant and negative correlation between toxic work environments and organizational support ($\beta = -0.145$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, it was found that organizational support mediated the relationship between the effects of the toxic environment and employee engagement ($\beta = -0.062$, $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that organizational support is associated with reduced negative outcomes in toxic workplaces.

Similarly, Kahya and Sahin's (2018) study found support for the idea that leaders' characteristics profoundly impact employees' performance. Leaders perceived as open and agreeable were associated with better employee outcomes, whereas negative traits were associated with poorer perceptions and lower effectiveness.

It is important to note that the findings are correlational rather than causal. However, when interpreted through the lens of the Equity Theory, toxic workplaces increase the perceived importance of effort and reward, which is associated with employee turnover. Through the lens of the Affective Events Theory, repeated exposure to toxic workplaces is associated with diminished engagement and employee well-being. According to the studies reviewed, supportive organizational culture and leadership are consistently associated with mitigating the toxicity's effects.

3.2. Knowledge Gaps and Future Study

More research is needed on toxicity effects, especially in demographic areas. Ethnic, cultural, and religious orientations also need to be explored. There are clear indicators of leader behavior influencing employee task performance and satisfaction, but not much in the way of perception by demographics that would identify gaps in treatment in a diverse workforce. While we know that organizational support and employee well-being can mitigate toxicity, we do not know how, nor do we know to what extent these impacts occur across different demographics.

Future studies should be developed within the framework of understanding the different impacts on underrepresented populations to determine whether leadership support and encouragement are stronger or more consistent across different demographics. Focus should also include qualitative analytics through interviews to better understand why employees feel impacted by the leadership in a toxic workplace.

Larger samples can reinforce the validity of the study. Future research can expand the parameters of employee well-being and include corporate culture, to see what effects, if any, specific areas of well-being, both professional and personal, may be present to mitigate toxicity. Future studies will be able to explore addi-

tional areas of concern related to toxicity, aiming to filter out toxic behaviors in the hiring process, performance review, and development process when deciding on promotions.

Further research should examine whether organizational support mitigates perceptions of inequity consistent with the Equity Theory and whether emotional responses to toxicity in the workplace vary across demographic or cultural contexts, as suggested by the Affective Events Theory.

4. Implications

The implications of this study are discussed in light of its limitations. More opportunities to expand on the topic and to identify clear drivers of productivity in a toxic workplace, as well as mitigation strategies, could lead to better company outcomes. With the information now available, companies can develop programs to enhance feelings of organizational support and employee well-being. Additionally, training to educate workers on the importance of reducing toxicity can help further mitigate the toxicity felt in the workplace.

5. Conclusion

Toxicity in the workplace is consistently associated with high costs for both the organization and the employee, including health-related costs, productivity losses, and increased turnover intentions. By integrating Equity Theory and Affective Events Theory, this review clarifies the mechanism through which toxicity impacts employee outcomes. The synthesis of approximately 20 empirical studies indicates that supportive organizational cultures and leadership structures are associated with mitigating these toxic workplace effects. Organizations seeking to mitigate workplace toxicity should prioritize systems that promote feelings of equity, support, and inclusivity to reduce the impacts of harmful toxic behaviors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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