Don’t Follow the Leader: The Poisonous Effects of Toxic Leadership

Submitted to the Virtual Conference on Moral Leadership and
the Journal of Virtues & Leadership

By
Angela Spranger, Ph. D., SPHR
14 Omera Place
Hampton, Virginia 23666
angesp1@mail.regent.edu
Toxic Leadership and Organizational Engagement

Abstract

Toxic leaders are present in every sphere, in every type of organization. These individuals manifest antisocial workplace behaviors (AWB) ranging from workplace incivility (rudeness, discourtesy, disrespect) to bullying, abusive supervision, and verbal or psychological abuse. In extreme cases, the behaviors indicate psychopathy, and in most cases, the leaders leave the employee and the team worse off than before. This study examines self-report data from a phenomenological exploration of employee engagement and organizational commitment in the presence of AWB, including toxic leadership. First a definition of antisocial workplace behavior as the major construct is presented. Next, a subconstruct of toxic leadership is addressed and its prevalence described. Finally, keys to encourage employee engagement rather than suppress it are presented, as a means to address toxic leadership and AWB.

Keywords: antisocial workplace behavior, AWB, toxic leadership, commitment, engagement
Don’t Follow the Leader: The Poisonous Effects of Toxic Leadership

The privilege and responsibility of participating in society in a meaningful, contributory manner allows individuals to engage with one another to define and develop society and its values on multiple levels. Work is part of the human condition (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2009), an integral part of being alive (Fox, 1994). Working becomes a means of expressing “our blessing” (Fox, 1994), and of developing and revealing our “whole self” (Chalofsky, 2003; 2010). Fox (1994) states that when we are unable to contribute in this way, we experience “psychological violence to the self” and miss the opportunity to “rearrange, invent, make possible... [and forget that] work is full of surprise and wonder” (p. 72). In the best case, individuals are motivated for work “not by being pushed into it or by outside compensation but by inner desire” (Fox, 1994, p. 71). However, the postindustrial emergence of bureaucratic systems along the lines of Weber’s early twentieth century conceptualization has minimized the value of spiritual and holistic investment in work. How, then, do we identify and manipulate the factors that lead to high organizational commitment and engagement? How do we encourage employees to offer the best of themselves, and help them to feel safe bringing their “whole self” to work? The influence of leaders in this relationship cannot be overstated.

Leaders are influential, motivational individuals who empower and equip others to achieve shared goals (Winston & Patterson, 2006). As a shared, interactive social practice (Weick, 1979), leadership is a “process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others… an obligation or a perceived right on the part of certain individuals to define the reality of others” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 258). Chalofsky (2003) suggests that organizational members act to improve one another’s lives, and Gini (2010) paraphrases St. Augustine, stating that "the first and final job of leadership is… to serve the
needs and the well-being of the people led” (p. 349). Followers make up the majority of organizational members, participants in the mission and functions supporting the company’s larger goals. Followers serve their own goals and, ideally, those of the group and organization. Chaleff (2008) suggested that both leader and follower serve the same organizational purposes, not one another. This opposes the traditional bureaucratic, mechanistic structure in which persons become instruments of production.

Hirschhorn (1988) states that the Wagnerian bureaucratic process is a “common feature of modern life” (p. 163) and a prevalent social defense, but in attempts to overcome this social defense, managers may create a “psychologically violent culture” (p. 167). Toxic leader behaviors emerge from such a culture, such an environment. Rituals of communication, such as documentation and formalized procedures, can become substitutes for true collaboration, leading to institutionalized passivity and compliance on the part of followers and overly controlling behavior by managers. Managers, leaders, begin to judge the followers, or subordinates, as good or bad, and enact a closed system. Followers then experience the workplace as a hostile, oppressive, toxic environment. As a result, their levels of trust and organizational commitment are reduced, leading to negative organizational as well as personal outcomes.

Getting the Full Story: Phenomenology

Demonstrating these negative outcomes, and the painful perceptions of work reported by followers at all levels, Fox (1994) titled his first chapter “The Pain of Work: Work as Nothingness and Lamentation.” Decades earlier, Terkel (1974) stated that

Work, by its very nature, [is] about violence – the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fist-fights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or
beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for
the walking wounded among the great many of us.

Low levels of organizational commitment manifest through artifacts, the language and rituals of
communication within the group. This study summarizes the findings of several in-depth
interviews with employees in a single large manufacturing employer, using a semi-structured
format so that the participants could explore for themselves their own experiences of antisocial
workplace behavior and/or toxic leadership. They were further asked to consider and share their
levels of organizational commitment and organizational engagement, based on their tenure and
other factors. They revealed that while their commitment to the organization or to its
management might be low or nonexistent, their engagement with the mission of the organization,
the canon of their profession, or the needs of their customers might be quite high.

In the present study, over 25 employees in a single large manufacturing company in the
southeastern United States were solicited for interviews about their experiences of antisocial
workplace behavior (AWB). Eleven actually completed the process, representing three
employment categories (hourly/production, salaried/professional, and management), five
divisions, and seven different professions. Some of the responses specifically addressed
experiences of toxic leadership and the effects of these experiences on the participants’ level of
organizational engagement and organizational commitment. Because organizational commitment
has been established as a theoretical construct, it was used to balance the interview protocol, but
what emerged was that participants were familiar with the Gallup Q12 survey and the term
“organizational engagement,” although it addresses different criteria than the commitment
construct.
While trading breadth for depth, the phenomenological study approach addresses the individual level of analysis, focusing on individuals’ experiences in their work setting, and how they are affected by those experiences in that setting (Giorgi, 1985; Patton, 2002). Variation across individuals working in the same organization will help “focus the analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 228). For example, the target organization in this study was so large (over 18,000 employees in one location) that many different management styles and leader/follower dynamics influence the culture, climate, and norms. Purposeful selection of information-rich, diverse cases helped to illuminate the research question, why people stay in toxic workplaces. Maximum variation sampling allowed for the capture of details that offered uniqueness and shared patterns, which both represent “important findings in qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 235). The study included representatives from seven disciplines, five departments, and three categories of employment (hourly, salaried professional, and management).

The initial study was based on two assumptions: first, that those individuals can identify the varying personal reasons why they stay; and second, that staying leads to specific individual and organizational outcomes. These outcomes may include decreased creativity and innovation, reduced discretionary effort, and dysfunctional internal competition. In this paper, excerpts from participant interviews are incorporated to illustrate theoretical concepts. Some participants reported leader or organizational negligence and oppression as a unique type of AWB, while others identified specific toxic leader behaviors that led to negative individual and organizational outcomes. Overall, participants reported 74 unique incidents of AWB; of those, 21 specifically involved abusive supervision and 31 referenced bullying (Table 1). In 25 of the 74 reported incidents, management or a specific manager was identified as the perpetrator or agent of AWB.
Using Baron and Neuman’s (1996) table as a guide, the frequency of participants’ experiences as reported in interviews and journals was determined (Table 2). This set of frequencies showed whether the participant described an incident that was verbal or physical, active or passive, attempted or completed, and whether the participant had made an attribution about the actor’s intentionality in the incident.

Table 1: Frequency of Occurrence by Type of AWB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Journals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervision</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying/Aggression</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse/altercation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal/Psychological abuse</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudeness, discourtesy, disrespect (workplace incivility)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor work performance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General environment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total occurrences of AWB, by report type*</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total occurrences reported from target workplace</td>
<td></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Including duplicate.

Table 2: Frequency of Occurrence by Descriptor and Perceived Intentionality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal/Physical</td>
<td>41/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active/Passive</td>
<td>52/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted/Completed</td>
<td>2/61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional/Unintentional</td>
<td>53/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Antisocial Workplace Behavior

Robinson and O’Leary-Kelly (1988) identified good reason for American managers and organizational researchers to study the prevention of antisocial workplace behavior (AWB) of all kinds. That reason is that 42% of women have reported instances of sexual harassment at work, 75% of employees have stolen from their employer, and 33% to 75% of employees report a
range of AWB from insubordination to sabotage. Robinson and O’Leary-Kelly’s quantitative study used data from 187 full-time workers, evenly balanced between men (52%) and women (48%) from 35 work groups across 20 different organizations. Employees had an average tenure of 5.93 years in their company and 3.87 years in current job. Their study relied on survey instruments to assess the predictive impact of organizational citizenship and loyalty on individual antisocial behavior, the dependent variable. They defined antisocial workplace behavior as negative behaviors in organizations, inclusive of a wide range of actions that have a harmful nature and offer the potential to hurt individuals and property. The data produced moderately negative correlations in each of the two relationships, lending support to the construct validity of the antisocial behavior scale they had developed.

**Toxic Leadership**

No existing research delves specifically into the jointly created workplace norms and realities created through social workplace exchanges and the participants’ memory and interpretation of those exchanges, which lead workers to characterize their workplaces as toxic. Gini (2010) described leader power as the capacity to control or direct change, stating that “all forms of leadership must make use of” positional power (p. 352). The question is whether or not that power will be used well, for the good of the group, in a “noncoercive manner to orchestrate, direct, and guide members of an organization in the pursuit of a goal or series of objectives” (Gini, 2010, p. 352). Leaders and followers in a totalitarian system, for example, must all conform to the organization’s norms in order to contribute to the self-preservation of the system. Kets de Vries (2006) addressed the concept of leadership by terror, or leadership that "achieves its ends and gains compliance through the use of violence and fear" (p. 197). Citing the work of
social scientists such as Asch, Schein, and Milgram, Kets de Vries stated that "the dispositions of violence that exists in all of us; everyone may have a despot in his or her basement" (p. 196).

Mourdoukoutas’ (2014) Forbes online article painted a picture of toxic leaders as workplace psychopaths, operating from an evil core. The image is offered of a leader “with a dark inner side, hidden motives and identities.” But everyone has a dark side, as Kets de Vries (2006) noted, and Kusy and Holloway (2009) showed that a toxic environment is a function of leader behaviors, follower behaviors, and environmental contingencies. Where anecdotal or observational research depicts evil, morally disengaged individuals, Zimbardo’s empirical research from the Stanford Prison Experiment and from consulting with those involved in the Abu Ghraib military trials shows that toxic leaders may emerge out of necessity or cultivation in a toxic work environment.

The superior boss-subordinate relationship is the pivotal environment through which work gets accomplished. Subordinates either affirm and support, or withdraw their affirmation and support, isolating the superior. Zaleznik (1970) identifies as a common executive mistake the confusing of compliance with commitment; compliance represents an “attitude of acceptance when a directive from an authority figure asks for a change in an individual’s position, activities, or ideas… [the individual] is indifferent to the scope of the directive and the changes it proposes [and offers] little difficulty in translating the intent of directives into actual implementaton” (p. 50). Commitment, though, represents “strong motivation on the part of an individual to adopt or resist the intent of the directive." If the individual is supportive, he or she will use ingenuity to interpret and implement the change, and work to assure success. If not, the individual may think compliance, but find ways to sabotage the initiative. This leads to a research question about the
real root and type of organizational commitment, as opposed to compliance (Zaleznik, 1970). Specifically, why do people stay in toxic workplaces, or continue to submit to toxic leaders?

**Toxic Leadership – Definition and Prevalence**

The Oxford English dictionary definition of the word “toxic” involves acting as or having the effect of poison. Specific to the Human Resource Management literature, Daniel (2009) addressed workplace bullying and psychological abuse, using the term “toxic environment.” Daniel asserted that over 30% of human resource professionals surveyed had observed behavior that violated their organization’s ethical standards, company policy, or the law. In an early conceptual paper, Ashforth (1994) used similar terms to describe the petty tyrant, stating that these toxic leaders and managers may find support, even encouragement, for uncivil behaviors from targets and followers who lack the necessary means to respond appropriately. Ashforth suggested that powerlessness, lack of credibility and the absence of autonomy limit followers’ response options in the face of petty tyranny. As one participant in the present study stated, a peer used verbal abuse, profanity, bullying and public shaming to gain his compliance:

…this woman’s manager … and the HR rep … they told me I had to drop it or there was going to be a letter put in my file. And I was like, but I didn’t do anything, I was just trying to stick up … for how we do things, but evidently they don’t want to create any waves, and, so I said “OK.” And then they wanted me to be friends with her and take her to lunch but I didn’t do that. – K.

The peer’s bullying was followed up by management coercion and Human Resources complicity, using positional power and coercion to stop his making “waves.” While the suggestion for K. to take the adversarial peer out to lunch was never enforced, K. did continue to experience incidents of betrayal and bullying in that workgroup.

Lipman-Blumen (2010) defines toxicity as “an act of commission or one of omission.” A study participant, D., indicated a pervasive undercurrent of toxic leadership:
… management creates an oppressive environment. It’s subtle, and it’s pervasive, so it affects everybody without them realizing it. Let me give you a for instance. They will call together a meeting of the entire group at a conference room. They know how many people are in their group, they know the capacity of the conference room, and they will go out of their way to deliberately schedule everybody in the conference room at one time knowing they will not all fit.

The heads will be at the table with reserved seats, and everyone else can stand around like cattle. That happens so routinely, and you have to go out of your way to do it. The only possible conclusion is that they are doing it deliberately. *Is there any consistency in who’s left standing?* Well it’s always people that aren’t management. Whereas if they were to split the meeting up into two sections, everybody could come and have a seat and be comfortable for the hour-plus presentation.

And that’s how pervasive it is. They literally no longer think about the impact of the way they routinely do business. The question just never crosses their minds, “is this the way you treat human beings, or is this the way you treat cattle?” – D.

Toxic leaders "have poisonous effects" on their workplaces in which intent and impact are intertwined. That is, the leader tells a lie, but that leader has an inherent character flaw that makes it acceptable to lie. In the present study, leaders represent company policy one way to their employees, discordant with published corporate requirements, and then coerce the employees into submission. A female participant (T.) demonstrated knowledge of corporate policy and business unit practices borne of over 25 years’ experience in the organization, indicating concern with her manager’s supervisory practices:

I think this is illegal and against the time and attendance policy… she’s verifying my time and has no idea what I’m doing.

I’m charging to (temporary department) charges, but she’s (home department supervisor) verifying my time. And I think that’s illegal, according to the little training that I had. Because how does she know if I’m even putting in the right time?

Then she questioned me about my time and I said, “no that’s what they told me to put in” and she said, “but I don’t think it should be that.” How do you know?
... So to me it’s just… lies, liars. They go against anything that corporate says. If corporate says do not verify salaried employee time, they want you to send them an email, when you leave, when you get there. If it’s outside of 7 to 3:30. To me, that’s how she knows if my time is not within that 7 to 3:30 time frame, with that email. Because she’s tracking my time. Which corporate says don’t track time for salaried employees.

And if you call the HR guy, he’s going to inform them on your whole conversation with him. And give them ammunition to go against you on anything. – T.

Toxic leader is further defined as an individual whose destructive behavior and dysfunctional personality characteristics generate serious and enduring poisonous effects on those they lead. Intentionality plays a part in determining an individual's level of toxicity. For example, an intentional toxic leader will "deliberately harm others or enhance themselves at others’ expense." (p. 29). Unintentionally toxic leaders "cause serious harm by careless or reckless behavior, as well as by their incompetence" (p. 29). In this study, one representative of management reported frustration with another member of management berating his team:

I would say that his involvement, or his review of his schedule is what came prior to him sending out the email, the notice that everybody sucks except for him.

I was just trying to think, I can’t really say as to why he continues to have the negative tones… it was interesting I ended up, one of the outcomes, meeting with his boss, explaining how … unacceptable [the] behavior and tone [were], and you know, don’t berate my folks at work for me, don’t belittle them in their jobs because their job is just as important as yours even though you may not think it is.

And the interesting response from his boss was, “yeah well, this guy, his past boss and his past boss had the exact same issue with this guy and they weren’t able to control him either.” (shakes head) – M.

The perpetrator represents a customer department. He had sent a scathing email reflecting rude and disrespectful opinions, with profane language, to the study participant’s entire team of employees.

Followers are poisoned, or suffer from toxicity when leaders focus on their own well-being and power above the needs of the follower. Both followers and the organization suffer as a
whole, when leaders act without integrity. Managers who withhold support, “leave you hanging,” or otherwise betray the employee’s psychological contract create an atmosphere of distrust:

… trust changed a lot, because at the time, the manager, I really had a lot of respect for the manager and when he didn’t stand by me… (hangs head)

When nobody stood up for me it was like, well, then you don’t value the employee as much as you value your false sense of calmness and everybody getting along, and it’s a “happy place to work” instead of dealing with the conflict. – K.

Most books on leadership focus on leaders rather than followers, but there is "no shortage of bad leaders to chronicle" (Lipman-Blumen, 2010, p. 384). In fact, Lipman-Blumen found 55 prominent leaders (including six women) who had behaved in a toxic manner, some of whom affected whole nations and others who supervised small teams of people in a verbally and psychologically abusive manner.

Boddy states that there are about one million psychopaths in the US, who have in common a “predisposition to have no conscience” (Kall, 2013). This makes them more competitive, more ruthless, and therefore more brutally achievement-oriented than others. When placed in organizational leadership roles, these individuals behave in ways that cause conflict and bullying to increase significantly and promote acts of counterproductive, AWB “because people take revenge against” the company for the bad behavior of the manager.

Abusive supervision represents a sustained display of hostile verbal or nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as a manifestation of dysfunctional workplace behavior involving tyrannical, ridiculing, and undermining actions by one's superior. Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter and Kacmar (2007) describe abusive supervision as a phenomenon affecting a substantial number of organizations and their members, stating that 10% to 16% of American workers report experiencing abusive supervision on a regular basis. These numbers have increased in recent years. Negative employee outcomes
Toxic Leadership and Organizational Engagement

include high turnover, stress, emotional exhaustion and perceptions of organizational injustice. Boddy explained that workplace psychopaths in leadership roles cause employee well being, perceptions of organizational justice and ethics, and trust in management all to decrease because employees see the toxic leader getting promoted while lying, manipulating others, and claiming credit for others’ work (Kall, 2013).

In a general review of the literature, Appelbaum and Roy-Girard (2007) sought to define toxic leaders, managers, cultures and organizations by reviewing the literature on deviant workplace behaviors. They found that toxic organizations demonstrate an orientation toward control and bureaucracy, remain in a state of constant crisis, may be unable to achieve goals and commitments, and demonstrate problem-solving processes driven by fear. These organizations also have poor internal communication practices. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard suggest that toxic leaders seek to maintain control of all components of the organization’s functioning, blaming others or covering up their own mistakes and avoiding any unpleasant situational realities. These leaders express only positive emotions and do not question or operate outside their role expectations, seeking first to protect their organizational image. In the present study, the manager M. who reported conflict with a high-ranking customer stated:

But this guy is one of our top performers and he gets the job done even though he’s rude and crass and causes a bunch of waves and he’s the squeaky wheel. At the end of the day he gets the job done so we can only be so tough on him. And it seems that it recurs about every two to three months. Just had another one last week. Same individual. – M.

Toxic managers represent a subset of toxic leaders, who destroy morale, reduce retention, and intercept cooperative efforts and information sharing. Toxic managers take credit for departmental successes, but are unpredictable and disrespectful to their staff members. They focus on schedule and budget, ignoring opportunities for feedback or creativity. These individuals may be narcissistic, aggressive, and rigid.
Fritz (2002; 2013) sought to construct a typology of “troublesome” bosses, peers, and subordinates to understand how individuals think about them. Fritz found that unpleasant workplace relationships cost managerial time and energy through mediating disputes and dealing with problematic subordinates, leading to a crisis of incivility (Fritz, 2013). This crisis, influences the professions and organizational lives of employees as it gains momentum in society. The study participants cited for this paper, K., T., M., and D., reflect the influence of this crisis in their reporting of abusive events with only periodic episodes of emotional content. They have become used to it.

Abusive, toxic leader behavior generally continues until one of three conditions arise: the target terminates the relationship, the agent terminates the relationship once it loses its utility, or the agent chooses to modify his or her behavior (Tepper, 2000). The behavior has an enduring quality because the target remains as long as they feel powerless to take corrective action. Abusive supervisor behaviors include public criticism, rudeness, coercion, loud, angry tantrums and other inconsiderate actions. While similar to early constructs like petty tyranny, abusive supervision definitely involves hostility as well as indifference. Abusive supervision may not be deviant, if it conforms to organizational policies or norms. In the present study, evidence of abusive supervision was counteracted by repeated statements that the behaviors represented a norm in that workplace. Prior to the present study, one long-service employee in a management role shared thoughts on how the workplace used to be much more severe than at present:

I’ve been working here some 26, 27 years now, and man I’ve seen ‘em come and go. Some of the managers, bosses I’ve had, whew. Real pieces of work. Yell at you, cuss you out. But at the end of the day, we got the job done, and I’m still here. Some of them aren’t. – B.

Perseverance, an attitude that “no matter what, they can’t break me,” emerged in several participant accounts. Reasons for staying in the toxic workplaces or in relationships with toxic
leaders included “I’m stubborn,” “just plain hardheadedness,” and “I don’t quit.” But the perseverance factor does not mask the actual outcomes of the toxic exchanges. The manager, M., identified the outcomes as frustrating to his own self-efficacy and self-esteem as a manager:

Couple of things. One, wearing. You know, just frustration of having to deal with, having to spend man-hours on something that shouldn’t even be dealt with.

And then having to, you know, hopefully the message getting across to my folks was hey I’ve got your back. And you know you guys shouldn’t stand for this and I don’t stand for it either.

So it’s kind of twofold, one is you know hey I want him to recognize that I don’t appreciate the comments, not needed not professional, change your attitude. Spending time dealing with all that. And then also, you know making sure that my folks understand that I’m not complacent about it. – M.

The effect on M.’s team was evident in the way they began to respond to that one high-level customer, as opposed to the way they responded to others:

They’re, they’re doing their jobs. No no, they’re not actively sabotaging anything. It’s, it’s just doing the job, not doing any more. Like compliance.

And, there is a level of trust there that’s, you know, it’s… again it’s that compliance. You ask me to do something, I’ll do it, I’m not giving you any more. – M.

When asked about his impressions of what was most surprising or troubling about the incident(s) he had described, M. said that it was:

…surprising that the behavior is tolerated.

[And I’m] troubled that the behavior is tolerated. And I guess it’s troubling that the example I gave before, that because of exceptional performance, unacceptable behavior is tolerated.

Historically his work is always finished on time or ahead of schedule. Ok and so that’s what’s respected and rewarded? Yes. Because a lot of the other areas are not finished on time or ahead of schedule. They are late to schedule… I mean at the end of the day the schedule is what keeps us in business.
And it’s management’s, management turning a blind eye. That’s what’s happening. I mean if this is the third boss that’s had to deal with this, this problem has been going on for ten years. So either management is ok with it, so if I can put a little phrase out there it’s management living with deficiency. – M.

When the manager confronted the behavior directly, no change happened, so he went “up the chain” with his complaint and learned that the customer’s boss knew of the behavior pattern but permitted it because of the individual’s record of getting results.

Other employee outcomes include feelings of helplessness, decreased self-efficacy, psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, work-family conflict, turnover intentions, decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and general feelings of unfair treatment. Harvey et al. (2007) found that employee experiences of abusive supervision directly predicted tension, emotional exhaustion, and intent to leave.

**Verbal and Psychological Abuse**

Sofield and Salmond (2003) described the lived experience of verbal abuse in a large, multi-hospital system, and determined the relationship of verbal abuse with turnover intent. Their sample included 1000 nurses with a response rate of 46% using a mailed questionnaire. Over 90% of the respondents reported experiencing verbal abuse in the last month from physicians, patients, patients’ families, peers, supervisors, and subordinates. The amount of abuse and the intent to leave were significantly related. Verbal abuse was directly related to decreased morale, increased job dissatisfaction and higher turnover. In a healthcare environment, verbal abuse affects nurses’ attitudes toward patient care, reduces teamwork, reduces efficiency, and leads to decreased accuracy. Frequent confrontations and general unease on the job result from concerns about safety and outcomes of care. This level of frustration leads to burnout, turnover, and decreased retention of experienced staff.
Verbal abuse has been linked to poor long-term relationships, lower job satisfaction, lower relaxation and well-being in the workplace, mistrust, low self-esteem, and low perceived organizational support from staff and superiors. Verbal aggression stresses individual's ability to use their coping mechanisms. Such ongoing stress is related to global health problems like hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease, depression, panic disorders and PTSD. Sofield and Salmond did find that verbal abuse predicted turnover and intent to leave. Study participant K. cited the shame and dismay of being cursed and insulted in front of his entire team in an email:

… when I questioned her in the email about what she wanted to do, her, of course she didn’t have a good answer so she lashed out. And you know of course it was sending it out to the whole department and you know, name calling, which … that was very unprofessional to swear in an email and call somebody names. –K.

But all experiences of verbal abuse do not lead to negative consequences. A., an hourly manufacturing employee, shared stories of verbal abuse from two different supervisors that had dramatically different effects on his performance:

[the first supervisor] it’s kind of his way or the highway. So he comes up on the job, you know, “what are you doing?” And I’m like, “I had an issue,” or whatever, and he like … (pause) Are you editing? (hesitates, nods) Did he use language, like profanity? Profanity. Yes… the worst part of that, the words I remember distinctly is… you might get fired, you will get fired… And I was brand spanking new out of welding school, I had just got the qualifications, I was new. (shakes head) – A.

The participant, A., felt uncomfortable at first using the profanity that was directed his way by this supervisor, but explained that it had had a demoralizing effect on him at that early stage in his career. Later, though, he had a “motivating” experience with a supervisor who also used profanity to correct his poor performance. His speaking rhythm accelerated and he became animated, reenacting the scenario, validating that toxic behavior may fit the norms of an organization and not be detrimental in all cases:
…but it definitely is probably my favorite quote I’ve ever heard. And I don’t know if it falls in there but it made me like totally switch what I was doing and do the job. So I don’t… I guess it was motivating to me but I don’t know if it could be disrespectful to other people.

Basically I was on a job working and he had just, he’s a brand new supervisor, so of course we, you know just like a substitute teacher, we tried to you know, we do it our pace, so to speak. The slow pace, like, ah, I’ll get it done, it’ll be all right. And he came up on the job and he was like, “what the f… are you doing? Why isn’t this done yet?” “Well, you know, I’m just, you know taking my time, making sure it’s right.”

You know, he came up on the job again, you know, I’m still like, still going slow, you know just doing my own pace.

And, he’s like, “lemme, come, come over here and talk to me.” And he was just like… “What are you doing, why are you… why is this not done yet?” and then I give all my excuses, you know doing my own pace, you know, it’ll get done eventually… and he’s just like, “I don’t want your f….’ excuses, I wasn’t f….’ born yesterday, you need to get this goddamn job done. I didn’t ask for your excuses. I asked you what you got done.”

_Hmmm._

YES! My favorite line. Straightened me out, put me back in the right spot. – A.

Contrary to the portrayal of workplace psychopaths and intentionally manipulative individuals, Lipman-Blumen suggests that leaders can be "toxic in some situations and not in others" (p. 30). In the situation A. described, the abusive language challenged him to perform and resonated with him on a deep level, increasing his respect for the supervisor who did not generally use harsh tactics.

Sutton (2007) made the business case against tolerating "nasty and demeaning people" who make it difficult to recruit and retain the best employees, clients and investors. Citing a quantitative study of 700 participants, 27% reported experiencing mistreatment by someone at work. A 2003 study of 461 participants working in the healthcare field indicated that 91%
experienced verbal abuse. Psychological abuse in the workplace refers to a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact. Sutton states that the total cost of jerks, or TCJ, must include the cost of overtime, turnover costs for assistants to those individuals, potential legal costs, and anger management training, all on top of salary and benefits.

There is also the threat of retaliation from victims or witnesses that can lead to legal costs and damage to the organization's reputation. The actors, or jerks, face humiliation themselves when it comes out that they are bullies and can lead to job loss and long-term career damage. Some of the consequences of entertaining bullies in the workplace include that management must spend time appeasing, counseling, and disciplining both the perpetrators and the targets of workplace incivility. There is also a cost associated with the time spent calming victimized employees, customers, contractors, and suppliers, and the time management must spend reorganizing the department and the teams so that the offenders do less damage. Finally there is the time spent interviewing, recruiting and training a replacement after a perpetrator leaves the company. There are also legal and human resource costs associated with an organization's choice to entertain a workplace bully.

**Bullying**

Kusy and Holloway (2009) describe bullying as the behavior of "someone who places targets in a submissive, powerless position [in which the target is]… Easily influenced and controlled, in order [for the agent] to achieve personal or organizational objectives" (p. 15). Experiencing or observing workplace bullying and other AWB represents a distraction from work tasks, and leads to reduced psychological safety. This creates a climate of fear, which reduces employee's ability to offer suggestions and learn from mistakes. It also leads to a loss of motivation and energy at
work. Some of the woes caused by jerks in the workplace include victims’ and witnesses’ hesitation to cooperate with them, or to deliver bad news to them.

Indicators of this phenomenon include absenteeism, stress-induced psychiatric and physical illness, increased turnover, or victims may turn into bullying jerks themselves (Sutton, 2007). In the present study, there is an air of bullying expressed by management’s implied threat to salaried employees’ jobs:

Well, a couple of tiers up in management is infamous for statements that the people who work for him “should be glad they have a job.” When you hear that from somebody who can make your job go away, there is at least a veiled threat there. Not only that but it establishes a tone for the people that work for him. They will naturally want to emulate what they see as his position. And so it ripples further down the chain. – D.

Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez (2006) state that 10 to 20% of all employees report experiences of workplace bullying, with psychological consequences equivalent to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) suffered by war and prison camp survivors. The stress of workplace bullying exceeds the stress caused by long work hours or excessive workloads. Little research exists identifying the organizational contexts likely to promote bullying behavior.

Hodson, Roscigno and Lopez completed a qualitative study in which their research team analyzed 148 organizational ethnographies for content referencing experiences and descriptions of bullying. They found that two dimensions of workplace context affect the likelihood of bullying: weak targets or low-level employees with relational powerlessness, and a state of mismanagement or poor leadership, which damages organizational coherence. Bullying is defined as a form of informal subtle and sometimes covert workplace behavior; it includes repeated attempts to torment, wear down, or frustrate another person; it further includes treatment that provokes pressures intimidates or otherwise causes discomfort (page 384). Bullying can include blatant emotional abuse violations of interpersonal norms and other means
of inflicting damage to an individual's sense of dignity and self-worth. Bullying represents a subcategory of conflict in organizations, but it has a unidirectional nature and a clear intention: use as a weapon to hurt others. Organizational context is a factor in individuals' perceived ability to exercise their own relational power to dominate others.

Experiences of bullying in the workplace lead to higher turnover and less favorable attitudes toward both the job and the organization (Kusy & Holloway, 2009, p. 15). Another participant, T., described an experience of toxic leadership in which a supervisor casually informed her, outside the context of a performance evaluation, that she was “improficient [sic]. At anything.”

I said since I’ve been up here I have worked for all of y’all (six different supervisors), twice. I have planned two training courses for (this department). I have trained a person in (key process). He got (promoted) this year and I didn’t! How you promote somebody I trained and then tell me I’m not proficient?

And this is where, I was getting mad… I’ve been here six and a half years and nobody’s ever asked me what was my background. Hell, they didn’t even know I was an Apprentice graduate! (The manager) didn’t even know I worked (for the company in a production skilled trade position prior to this job) for fifteen years! – T.

Kusy and Holloway agree with Hirschhorn (1988) in suggesting that talented people tend to leave a toxic organization while the marginal or mediocre stay. This study participant had developed expertise in multiple key processes, but had escaped the notice of management for several years. She indicated a perception of experiencing sexism and bullying on her team, in which she is the only female under a female supervisor.

I send in a time and attendance plan a year in advance, and renewed monthly. So my shift is 7 to 3:30, anything outside of that is flex, but I feel like I am treated differently than my coworkers. Because they don’t have to do it. It’s bullying because there’s different requirements for different people on time.

But the supervisor, I feel like the supervisor is a liar anyway. She will say things different to me from coworkers who have experience as foremen…
And they don’t even tell her that they want to leave, that they have a doctor’s appointment. They just say they’ve got personal leave, they want personal leave. They’ve got personal appointments.

… I think she’s using two different sets of rules for people, or three different sets of rules. And I’m the only female that works for her. So it could be sexual discrimination I don’t know. Because the guys seem to be able to get away with anything that they want to do. Like the lead for my section, he’ll come in at 6:30 and tell her he needs to get off at 2. But if I did it I would get a long dissertation about planning your time and everything like that. And she is aware that I am a single parent and that I don’t have a spouse to defer some of the stuff to. We’ve had conversations about that.

When my mom was sick and dying from cancer I told her (supervisor) I needed a day. I just, I don’t have anything to do. I just need a day, where I don’t have anything to do. And she said, “well I don’t even take them, I don’t even get them.” And she did grant it, but… her response was “I have to get with the manager first and make sure it’s ok.” - T.

Even under dire personal circumstances, this manager withholds validation and support, favors one group of employees (men) over another (women), and offers unsubstantiated, harsh criticism of work performance. It seems that no thought is given to the effect of these actions on employee motivation and engagement.

Organizational Commitment, Engagement, or Entrenchment

Meyer, Becker, and Vandenbergh (2004) stated that organizational science and practice have long shown interest in employee motivation and commitment based on the belief and evidence that there are benefits to having a motivated and committed workforce. Multiple conceptualizations exist of organizational commitment or engagement. Fritz, Arnett and Conkel (1999) agree that organizational commitment represents the extent to which an individual intends to stay with the company, shares the company’s values, and is proud of working there, based on an earlier definition by Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979).
The impact on the study participant M.’s organizational engagement was significant as he reflected on the impossibility of his position:

Maybe 85% is where I am now. And that engagement piece is, what I struggle with every day is as a manager I think my job is to interact with my staff, get them what they need to be successful to do the job that I am asking them to do. What I find is that my work load that I am given from my boss and his boss prevents me from doing that. And when I raise that issue, it’s not, it’s never been a successful discussion.

In fact… one of the [times] when it came to a head, it was hey, I’ve got these 22 things on my plate, and guess what, of those 22 things you’ve asked for 21 of them [talking to his superior]. And this other thing is spending time with my folks, helping them be smarter be brighter or working faster working better, and because I’m focused on these other items I can’t focus on this.

And I was told [by the superior] “yeah, that comes second. All this other stuff comes first.”

Which to me is the wrong thing because as a manager I should be managing people. I shouldn’t be managing paper and processes. So, my engagement is, I would say it’s about 85%.

I’d say I’m 100% engaged with the company… -M.

When questioned about his level of commitment to the organization, the immediate superior, or the work group, his answer was:

I would say that I’m probably more committed to my superior, and to the organization. And then less to the work group. Why?

Um, superior is where the change in direction comes. So that’s, you know, I can follow orders well, so when I’m told, you gotta go focus on this, you gotta go do this, you gotta do this, that’s what I focus it on.

And… I’d like to think that, the things I put in place or the training I’ve provided or the tools I’ve provided for my folks is enough for them to do their job. But I also see sometimes that nope, they need more attention. And when I’m, when I present those options to my boss of hey I can’t do what you want, because I need to spend more time over here, it’s looked upon negatively like I’m not managing my job well.
When asked about why he had stayed in the environment he described, the participant said:

I genuinely believe in the purpose that company provides ... So it’s the mission if you will. And I, you know, every day when I wake up, I don’t mind going to work. Because of the purpose and the mission... Purpose, mission, and also it’s the people that I work with. So it’s a combination of the people and the job itself. (comment about unique, favorable location of office) And it pays well.

A manager for five years and a member of that work group for 11, M. indicated that in terms of organizational commitment, he would still stay there if his pay were reduced by up to 25% (he quantified it). He would also stay if his best friends left, but “probably not” if the company’s mission or business model changed significantly, depending on how severely the change contradicted his own beliefs and values.

While Zaleznik focused on compliance, Meyer, Allen and Gellatly (1990) and Meyer, Becker and Vandenbergh (2004) defined three different types of organizational commitment: affective, normative, and continuance, which more effectively parse the layers of rationale behind why people stay in a workplace environment. Affective commitment describes the emotional attachment and psychological identification with the organization and its goals and values, while normative commitment develops “as a function of cultural and organizational socialization and the receipt of benefits that activate a need to reciprocate” (2004, p. 994).

Well, [my organizational commitment] did change. Because it’s not so much ... it was the Company too, where the HR person’s in there saying shove it under the rug and didn’t want to deal with it either, so they’re useless. You can’t, if another problem ever came up, or if I ever have another problem, I know I can’t go to HR I can’t go to the Hotline I can’t go anywhere. There’s nothing for me to resolve anything because you can’t trust the company you can’t trust the people in charge to do the right thing. So basically you just avoid, just avoid everything. Waiting for time to pass. –K

Continuance commitment involves the tendency to maintain a certain level and type of activity once begun. In accounts of affective commitment, employees stay because they want to; in
continuance commitment, they stay because they need to and may perceive a lack of alternatives, while in normative commitment, they stay out of a sense of obligation. When asked why he had remained in the same environment for as long as he had (13 years), this participant stated:

Well I think of the mission of the company (quotes mission). And I always tell them, I’ve been telling people lately it’s (quotes mission, regarding fulfilling purpose at a financial loss if required) and they don’t like to hear that. And it’s just a reality, either let’s do the right thing or change the mission. Because it doesn’t go along, we don’t believe what we’re saying. –K.

However, when asked if he would continue to stay in the environment if his best friends left, or if the mission or business model of the company changed, he stated that he would. Only if his pay were significantly decreased would he leave, and then only after finding another job.

Conversely, individuals who have specific types of organizational commitment may report higher tolerance for workplace incivility and toxic leadership. Fox (1994) set the tone for the ideal work experience, stating that if we are aware, “we praise God by our work” (p. 23). This suggested that any work that has meaning and contributes to the common good, if fairly compensated and performed in safe conditions, is an opportunity for meditative, sacred expression. Chalofsky (2003; 2010) further defined the construct of meaningful work. Meyer and Allen (1991) offered perhaps the most widely accepted typology of commitment with affective, continuance, and normative commitment subscales (Blau & Holladay, 2006; Dunham, Grube & Castaneda, 1994; Grant, Dutton & Rosso, 2008; Meyer, Allen & Gellatly, 1990; Obeng & Ugboro, 2003; Shore & Wayne, 1993; Sinclair, 1994; Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen & Wright, 2005; Steel & Ovalle, 1984; Taing, Granger, Groff, Jackson & Johnson, 2011). Based on these studies, people who view their work as an expression of faith (as in Colossians 3:23), or who seek meaningful labor as a personal expression of their gifts and talents, may report different levels of affective, normative, and continuance commitment than others and may verbalize a higher level
of organizational engagement than expected based on experiences of AWB, as did the participant
K.:

I’m … always 100% engaged at work. I work… when I’m there I work. I’m putting a lot into my job, and I believe I’m one of the most engaged employees in our department. I’m always sharing and giving ideas and a lot of times it’s rejected, I get a lot of pushback on things, to do the right things. It’s not like I’m just coming up with crazy ideas. These are just, these are sound practices what’s happening in the industry, what’s happening in other organizations to better the organization. – K.

Despite his experience and overall perceptions, this participant felt 100% engaged, and when asked “to whom do you feel more committed, your overall organization, your immediate supervisor, or your workgroup?” he answered,

… the work group. Not to the immediate supervisor or anything, I don’t feel any obligation to the department or the supervision. (Why is that?) Lack of respect for them. For the decisions that they make. – K.

After over 25 years working for the company, and eight years in the department, T. stated that experiences of AWB and toxic leadership have decreased her trust in management:

Oh I feel very disengaged. As part of the team. I was hoping that I would do a good enough job where they have assigned me at now where they would want to keep me and I didn’t have to go back… But … I was lied to again, and I feel like it’s a lie because when I confront you, you tell me you’re going to check and you never get back with me. – T.

T. was talking about her primary supervisor, but she had been placed on a temporary assignment in a different department:

Why should I be engaged when it’s not seen, it’s not encouraged, it’s not… what’s the word I’m looking for, it’s not rewarded. My engagement is not rewarded. (sigh)

So that’s something I’m struggling with now for my return back to them, which may be sooner than I want. I have no trust of any of them. Nothing they say, if they wouldn’t put it in writing I wouldn’t believe it. So for her to come up to me and say anything I would take it with a grain of salt and believe it’s a lie, until it was proven to be true. – T.
The discouraging effects of this participant’s perceptions of betrayal and disrespect were evident when asked about what she found most troubling or surprising about the behavior she had observed:

That I’m worthless. That’s the most troubling thing. [long pause]

Well, she gave the perception that she was speaking for the whole team, for the whole management team that they all found me improficient in any area, but I believe it’s her perception. I don’t believe she’s taken time to realize anything about me, anything about me.

And I think another thing that’s troubling is, I’m improficient but I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to do… I think what bothers me the most is, every PA, at the end of the year, I take the time to write out my responsibilities for that particular year. The things that I’ve done, the backups that I am, the things that I support. And each year, it goes unread.

Because from supervisor to supervisor no one has taken the time to open that folder and look at anything that I’ve been given to do. So the new supervisor looks at me as a new employee, though I’ve worked for them before. They look at me as a brand new employee, empty, unvaluable, unlearned, unskilled, untrained.

I’m here, but I am so done. If it doesn’t pertain to anything on my PA, please don’t ask me to do it. I will not do your work. What you need to do is stop running your mouth so much and get the work done that’s required of you. I’m not going to do it. (referring to the supervisor)

I’m done. What is left here for me? After eight years? And you have tallied up nothing you could put in the pro column for me? If nothing but you are real good with your time and attendance, nothing? … I’m looking to leave. – T.

Prior research has indicated a significant correlation between such low engagement and turnover. One participant, though, felt that higher turnover would be helpful in his department, because of the current psychological environment in the department:

Oh, they, their psychology as a group up there is as genuinely… like, for example it would be close to what you would find in a low security prison. If you take any large group of people and put them in an oppressive environment at low level for long enough
they’ll all end up with the same … you’ll see a small increase in psychological
disturbances. The generally repressed emotions, generally repressed attitudes, surrender.
– D.

When asked about his commitment to the organization, the immediate superior, or the
workgroup, D. said, “I don’t feel any commitment to any of them.” He felt no identification with
the company’s values. Recalling Lipman-Blumen’s (2005) commentary about toxic leaders who
seek their own benefit to the detriment of the organization, when asked about emotional feelings
regarding the company, he said:

No I don’t particularly like the company. No… the company is not morally offensive to
the point where I would feel any obligation to leave… [but] I will NEVER have a sense
of pride in that company. That company is at some level, despicable. That organization,
their decision-making does not come from a core set of moral values.

If you want to know what a company truly values, don’t look at their mission statement,
look at what they reward.

And what do they reward? Closed-in, us versus them mentality. The good old boy
network. They will promote people that are not competent to positions they know at the
time the people are not competent at and are unlikely to ever actually become good at, to
preserve the good old boy network at the expense of the company.

At the expense of the company? Yes. The people running the company have no problem
hurting the company in order to achieve to them a much higher goal of preserving their
clique. Their clique exists to provide them with a defense against challenges, which the
truly incompetent among us need. That’s not a want for them, that is a need. No amount
of wanting to do better, or wanting the company to be more profitable, will ever
supersede that need. – D.

D. insisted that his organizational commitment had more to do with inertia than on any other
factor, and that the decision to stay or leave rested on whether the experience of working there
became so unpleasant that it necessitated finding “somewhere else. The question is not anywhere
but here, but what are the pros and cons for where I am versus where I could go to.”
Toxic Leadership and Organizational Engagement

Effects on Organizational Engagement

The negative effect of AWB and toxic leadership on organizations emerges in both scholarly and popular literature. Sutton (2007) lists reduced creativity and innovation, reduced discretionary effort, and dysfunctional internal competition. In addition, the organization faces impaired cooperation from outside organizations and people, as well as difficulty attracting the best and brightest to their workforce. Moreover, some organizations may face higher rates charged by outsiders who have to deal with their dysfunctional organization members. Hutton (2006) summarized the extant research by stating that the cost of workplace violence in the United States topped $4 billion per year as of 2006, linking employees’ experience of antisocial workplace behavior to the 1,000 annual deaths that occur in American workplaces. Hutton’s (2006) review of the literature identified studies of incivility occurring in society, as well as in workplaces such as judicial systems, university settings, and healthcare organizations. Using the “toxic work environment” phrase in popular press articles, Hutton (2006) suggests that effective leaders and managers can and should use the prevalence of workplace incivility to gauge the potential for violence in their workplaces.

Harter, Schmidt, Killham and Asplund (2006) offer an update to Gallup’s original 1997 meta-analysis of studies that investigated the relationship of employee satisfaction and engagement with business and work unit profitability, productivity, employee retention, and customer satisfaction / loyalty across 1,135 business units. The Q12 survey instrument deployed by Gallup shows that by encouraging mindful self-awareness among employees and, more importantly, encouraging supervisors and managers to manipulate the contingencies of the employment relationship so that employees can answer the Q12 items in the strongly affirmative, organizations can increase their key metrics.
Table 3: Gallup Q12 Organizational Engagement Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00</td>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>At work, I know what’s expected of me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I have the materials and equipment to do my job right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I have received recognition / praise in the last 7 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>My supervisor seems to care about me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Someone at work encourages my development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>At work, my opinions seem to count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The mission of the organization makes me feel my job is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I believe my associates are committed to quality work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I have a best friend at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>In the last 6 months, someone talked with me about my progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>In the last 12 months, I have had the opportunity to learn and grow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Harter et al., 2006

Harter’s team analyzed the generalizability of the relationship between engagement and outcomes, which found substantial criterion-related validity for each of the Q12 items. The 2006 study is the sixth published iteration of the Q12 meta-analysis, focused on the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance outcomes including customer loyalty, profitability, productivity, employee turnover, accidents, absenteeism, and merchandise shrinkage. The connection here is that employee engagement has direct effects on important organizational and individual metrics, if engagement can be increased by addressing and reducing antisocial workplace behavior, then the organization stands to benefit significantly by doing so.

In a popular press online article for the Gallup organization, Harter (2012) points out that the correlations for work engagement and emotional health by day of week remain significant after controlling for household income, age, gender and number of children in the household. Disengaged workers experience worse workdays and worse weekends; those individuals’ work experiences carry over into their home life. Engaged employees maintain their positive mood
Toxic Leadership and Organizational Engagement

throughout the whole week, are more productive, maintain better health, are immune to stress from commuting and are more likely to be thriving in general. Harter and the Gallup organization have demonstrated the mediating role of stress in the relationship between low engagement and poor dietary choices, which lead to health issues and the conclusion that the wellbeing of actively disengaged workers is significantly worse than that of the engaged, but also even of the unemployed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to study participants, organizational bureaucracy at the target organization is high, but organizational chaos is also high and there is a lack of organizational transparency. This leads to an atmosphere in which bullying and verbal/psychological abuses continue without rebounding badly on the actors. Limited behavioral accountability reinforces an atmosphere of relational powerlessness. This supports the literature on barriers to exit (Lipman-Blumen, 2005); the impact of toxic managers (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007); and the demonstrated effects of job stressors, organizational constraints, and interpersonal constraints on job satisfaction and other outcomes (Penney & Spector, 2005).

The incidents these participants described represented AWBs for that culture and caused frustration due to the interruptions in the workflow they created. As described earlier in this study, articulation and reinforcement of an organization or group culture happens through the statement and reiteration of a company’s philosophy (mission statement). In the interview process, one participant quoted the company mission statement verbatim, paused for a beat, and then expressed regret that “we don’t mean it.” The sadness of that statement lent great poignancy to the moment; the sentiment of disappointment in the company and its management weighed heavily, since the participant really does “mean it.”
Overall, participants made sense of their workplace experience by attributing responsibility to management for failing to address overt acts of rudeness, disrespect, and discourtesy and to human resource departments for permitting management to treat employees differently and, in some cases, cruelly. Some participants used Christian normative language to express their transcendence of the antisocial workplace environment and credited their faith in God for the positive, character-building lessons learned from the experiences they described. In one instance, the female D. indicated a greater than normal spirit of holding management and human resources accountable for maintaining the work rules and a professional environment, regardless of how it led to her being teased or treated differently.

Participants identified self-protection and social identity as the motivation behind the bad behavior, citing the actor’s “arrogance,” established work persona, or the fact that the individual felt “threatened” or “jealous” of the target. The escalation in workplace aggression sometimes led to a formal détente, such that the actor/agent and target mutually agreed (whether tacitly or explicitly) to give each other space, to leave each other alone. The sentiment indicated that if management refused to help resolve the conflict, then the employees will just give each other a wide berth. Conflict resolution in the represented work groups seemed nonexistent, in fact anathema, which K. stated clearly: “They act like it’s a bad thing and they treat it as you’re not supposed to have a conflict with anybody you work with. And that doesn’t build the team.”

Effective conflict resolution and team development seem absent in this workplace, replaced with the “oppressive environment” described by the male participant, D.: “From the perspective of attempting to improve any situation, that’s all but abandoned. Nobody wants to be the person who stands out.”
The frequency and intensity of rudeness, discourtesy, and disrespect do seem to be getting worse in the workplace, as suggested in the literature (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000). Participants in this study described managers who destroy morale (as when K. felt humiliated in a staff meeting by the manager jeering at someone else for “trying to be like” him), take credit for departmental successes (or their subordinates’ work product, as with participant S.), and act in ways that are disrespectful to staff members and colleagues. This supports Appelbaum and Roy-Girard’s (2007) construct of toxic leaders, people who blame others, cover up their own mistakes, and avoid any unpleasant situational realities. This description fits multiple participants’ descriptions of their management environment, including the male M.’s superior who intercepts cooperative efforts and limits information sharing, while restricting M.’s attempts to serve his followers.

Recommendations for more effective organizational leadership include reinforcing the organization’s corporate positioning (e.g., we do not verify time for salaried employees, we believe in increasing organizational engagement) and following through with the initiatives that support that position and its artifacts (rewarding employees who live the mission). Additionally, instituting conflict management processes that do not stifle dissenting voices but that require respectful discourse might strengthen members’ level of trust and engagement. Finally, taking firm and decisive action against behaviors that are abusive even when the actor is a high-performer, or a jerk according to Sutton (2007), can have a significant morale-improving and performance-increasing effect on organizational members.
Bibliography


Toxic Leadership and Organizational Engagement


