Exploring Toxicity in the Workplace in a Saudi Arabian University from the Perspectives of Senior Personnel and Faculty Members

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Abstract

This study focuses on the context of a Saudi University to: (1) identify the behaviours and characteristics of toxic members in the workplace; (2) understand the impact of a toxic member within a workplace; (3) understand how leaders manage toxic individuals. The survey conducted comprised of seventy-five items developed based on four primary themes identified in the interview analysis, the key findings of the literature review, and some items used by Kusy and Holloway (2009), with some minor modifications. The survey was distributed to 500 faculty members at different colleges, including those in leadership positions, at MU. The percentage of return from the questionnaires was (26.8%); 134 questionnaires are valid for analysis. The results identified several behaviours and characteristics of toxic members in the workplace: prevalence of gossip, lack of confidence in others, and failure to accept others' opinions were in the top three. Toxic members within a workplace were found to lower workers' self-esteem, undermine confidence and even create

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financial crises. Leaders reacted by either forming a committee of professionals to treat the toxic individual, leaving the organisation, requesting the services of an external consultant or reducing the perceived causes of harmful behaviours. The research recommends creating a committee of professionals to deal with the behaviour of toxic individuals and identifying suitable external consultants. The researcher also recommends conducting qualitative studies based on the results of this research. Specially Regarding to Behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals, the results reveal a general mean of 2.915 (medium). Although the general degree of response is not high, this result exposes a critical level of toxicity and decision makers should be concerned about this outcome and its effects on universities performance.

Key words: Toxicity, Workplace, Saudi Arabian, University, Faculty Members

اكتشاف ظاهرة السُّمِّيَّة Toxicity في مكان العمل في إحدى الجامعات السعودية من وجهة نظر القادة وأعضاء هيئة التدريس.

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الملخص

تركز هذه الدراسة على إحدى الجامعات السعودية من أجل: (١) التعرف على سلوكيات وخصائص الأعضاء السامة في مكان العمل. (٢) فهم تأثير العضو السام في مكان العمل؛ (٣) فهم كيفية تعامل القادة مع الأفراد السامة. يتكون المسح الذي تم إجراؤه من خمسة وسبعين عنصرًا تم تطويرها بناءً على أربع موضوعات أساسية تم تحديدها من خلال تحليل المقابلة، والنتائج الرئيسية لمراجعة الأدبيات، وبعض العناصر التي استخدمها Kusy و(2009) Holloway، مع بعض التعديلات. تم توزيع الاستبيان على ٥٠٠ من أعضاء هيئة التدريس في كليات مختلفة، بما في ذلك أولئك الذين يشغلون مناصب قيادية في جامعة MU. كانت نسبة العائد من الاستبانات (٢٦٫٨٪)؛ ١٣٤ استبانة صالحة للتحليل. حددت النتائج العديد من السلوكيات والخصائص للأعضاء السامين في مكان العمل ومنها: انتشار القيل والقال، وعدم الثقة في الآخرين، وعدم قبول آراء الآخرين كانت في المراكز الثلاثة الأولى. وجد أيضاً أن الشخصيات السامة في ميدان العمل تؤثر على تقدير الذات والشعور بالثقة وكذلك خلق أزمات مالية في المنظمة. كان رد فعل القادة حول ظاهرة السمية في المنظمة إما من خلال تشكيل لجنة لمعالجة الفرد السام، أو مغادرة المنظمة، أو طلب خدمات استشارية خارجية أو تقليل الأسباب المتصورة للسلوكيات

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الضارة. يوصي البحث بتشكيل لجنة من المهنيين للتعامل مع سلوك الأفراد السامة
بشكل رسمي ومنظم وتحديد المستشارين الخارجيين المناسبين لكل سلوك سام. كما
توصي الباحثة بعمل دراسات نوعية بناءً على نتائج هذا البحث. خاصة فيما يتعلق
بالسلوك والخصائص الضارة لبعض الأفراد، فقد كشفت النتائج عن متوسط عام
قدره ٢,٩١٥ (متوسط). على الرغم من أن درجة الاستجابة العامة ليست عالية في
نتائج هذا البحث، إلا أن هذه النتيجة تكشف عن مستوى حرج من السمية ويجب على
صانعي القرار أن يهتموا بهذه النتيجة وتأثيراتها على أداء واستقرار الجامعات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السُّمِّيَّة، مكان العمل، المملكة العربية السعودية، الجامعة، أعضاء هيئة
التدريس.

1. Introduction

Employees spend a considerable amount of time in the workplace, and it is therefore vital to provide them with a comfortable and appropriate environment. However, some personal, social, and organisational factors can result in instances of corruption, along with the mistreatment and harassment of employees, leading to a sense of insecurity. A number of researchers from a variety of fields have examined the factors playing a pivotal role in establishing a pleasant and positive atmosphere at work. This has tended to focus on the need for an organisation to hire capable and qualified personnel with appropriate skills, with many studies exploring ways of recruiting high-performing employees capable of delivering high quality work and so enhancing the productivity of an organisation (Lazear and Oyer, 2007; Gibbons and Roberts, 2013). Such recruits are known as 'stars', and are seen as capable of increasing an organisation's overall performance and

productivity (Sauermann and Cohen, 2010; Oettl, 2012). Several studies have explored the positive impact of: (1) job satisfaction; (2) the relationship between colleagues; and (3) a supportive workplace culture and atmosphere. Other studies have focused on aspects harmful for both an organisation and its personnel resulting in high levels of workplace stress, i.e. a culture of rudeness, harassment and bullying.

A number of researchers have highlighted the negative impact of both stress and an atmosphere of tension in the workplace (Mazzola, Schonfeld, Spector, 2011; Schulte, Wagner, Ostry et al., 2007). Stress has been defined by Colligan and Higgins, 2005, p.90) as a "change in an individual's mental, psychological and physical state, resulting in considerable harm to his/her emotional well-being". Furthermore, many studies have analysed the impact of long working hours on emotional and physical health, highlighting that employees with a habit of working late are at a higher risk of destroying their health. This conclusion was supported by Fagan, Lyonette, Smith, Saldaña-Tejeda (2012), who also noted that long working hours can lead to the lack of a healthy work-life balance.

The concept of a toxic workplace is one that has attracted the attention of researchers focussing on various working situations. Several factors tend to contribute towards the creation and maintenance of a toxic and destructive environment for employees, including: (1) bullying; (2) harassment; (3) excessively long working hours; (4) the absence of good working relationships between colleagues; (5) isolation; (6) conflict; (7) negative competition between workers; (8) ambiguity; (9) excessive workload; and (10) a lack of leadership.

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A considerable number of studies have focused on the impact of a toxic environment and working relationships in the context of the Western working environment. However, there remains a lack of analysis of Eastern working environments, including those in higher education. Many researchers have studied the influence of toxic leaders and a toxic environment on workers (e.g. Goldman, 2006; Pelletier, 2010; Reed, 2004; Reed and Olsen, 2010; Steele, 2011), while others have studied the results of working in a toxic environment on the emotional well-being of leaders. A number of researchers have focussed on the influence of organisational culture (e.g. Flynn, 1999; Hartel, 2008; McClure, 1996; Shain, 2009; Walton, 2008) when it comes to: firstly, the interactions between colleagues (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010; Frost, 2003) and secondly, working processes (Frost, 2003; Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004).

Scholars have noted that a toxic environment can be identified as a 'systemic' issue, in which a group of similar aspects are interrelated and work in similar ways. A number of studies have referred to factors capable of creating toxicity as 'stressors' or 'toxins'. However, it should be noted that, rather than being chemical in nature, these issues tend to be organisational and social. In addition, the term 'workplace toxicity' can be used to highlight a negative influence radiating from any source, i.e. toxic leaders, a toxic environment or toxic decisions.

This current study contributes to the literature by highlighting various aspects of a toxic environment from the perspective of academic leaders and faculty members of MU, a Saudi University. The study is thus situated in the context of a Saudi University and aims to: (1) identify the behaviours and characteristics of toxic members in the workplace; (2)

understand the impact of a toxic member within a workplace; (3) understand the ways leaders tend to deal with toxic individuals within their organisation; and (4) examine evidence for any significant differences between the responses of the participants.

2. Literature review

Rachel Feintzeig (2013) of The Wall Street Journal stated that 50% of employees have experienced discomfort at work on a regular basis, along with a lack of respect and civility from colleagues. Research has also found that 96% of employees have experienced rudeness and disruptive behaviour, while 26% stated that a high level of incivility had caused them to resign. This highlights that toxic workplaces are those in which employees are treated with incivility and disrespect, leading to a feeling of being undervalued (Lavender and Cavaiola, 2014).

Lavender and Cavaiola (2014) stated that a toxic work environment (i.e. one in which employees are threatened, abused, embarrassed and harassed) lowers productivity, while simultaneously increasing levels of stress, frustration and insecurity. Such a toxic environment can, in some cases, be transformed into a hostile workplace. It has been estimated that approximately 64% of employees are currently working alongside toxic colleagues, with almost 94% having experienced working with toxic personalities over the course of their working life (Kusy and Holloway, 2009, p. 9). Furthermore, it should be recognised that employees forced to resign as a result of a toxic atmosphere can prove difficult to replace, thus highlighting the importance of eliminating toxicity in order to ensure an organisation's increased productivity.

Workplace toxicity has been found to result in a reduction in productivity (Appelbaum et al., 2007; Brown, 2004; Dyck et

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al., 2001; Goldman, 2006; Ghosh et al., 2011), owing to: (1) a rapid turnover of employees; (2) vacancies that remain unfilled; (3) frequent absenteeism (Appelbaum et al., 2007; Chamberlain et al., 2010; Dyck et al., 2001; Goldman, 2006; Flynn, 1999; Kimura, 2003); and (4) an undermining of revenue (Appelbaum et al., 2007; Roy-Girard, 2007; Brown, 2004; Chamberlain et al., 2010; Steele, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2011; Goldman, 2006; Flynn, 1999; Kimura, 2003).

This indicates the need to address workplace toxicity, due to a number of detrimental impacts on individual well-being, and in particular psychological well-being, resulting in: (1) distress and depression (Flynn, 1999; Reed, 2004); (2) anxiety and nervousness (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007; Dyck et al., 2001; Gallos, 2008; Goldman, 2006; Maitlis et al., 2004); and (3) exhaustion and burnout (Frost and Robinson, 1999; Lawrence, 2008). Victims of toxicity can also suffer from financial difficulties as well as a reduction in their productivity (Goldman, 2006; Steele, 2011). Furthermore, employees impacted by the experience of toxicity frequently suffer from poor physical health and personal development (Brown, 2004; Ghosh et al., 2011; Lawrence, 2008), which manifests itself in the form of reduced self-esteem (Goldman, 2006; Pelletier, 2010), a feeling of demotivation (Chamberlain, 2010; Pelletier, 2010) and a loss of self-confidence (Pelletier, 2010). Many employees also experience physical pain (e.g. Gallos, 2008; Frost et al., 1999), muscle stiffness (Dyck et al., 2001; Yeo et al., 2008) and nausea, and can be at higher risk of more serious consequences, i.e. heart attacks.

Some studies have concluded that, despite the current lack of empirical confirmation, organisational culture is capable of promoting damaging behaviours while at the same time

inhibiting positive approaches. This has highlighted the need to address behaviours facilitating toxicity (e.g. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007; Frost and Robinson, 1999; McClure, 1996; Nursing Standard, 2011; Shain, 2009). Padilla et al. (2007) identified the 'toxic triangle', which can help damaging leaders to understand the harm caused by their behaviour, as well as the conditions empowering such negative aspects. Padilla et al. (2007) therefore stated that any tolerance of a leader's harmful conduct can cause this behaviour to spread within an organisation, resulting in toxic consequences. Those who have worked in toxic situations and experienced harassment (at both first- and second-hand) have reported elevated levels of anxiety and depression, resulting in a greater number of sick days taken than those working in a positive environment (Richardson, 2014). McClure (1996) proposed the primary reason for toxic authority (i.e. a culture supporting damaging conduct) is such conduct becoming part of the identity of an organisation, in the form of a 'macho culture' that emphasises the virtue of "taking it like a man" while not making any in-depth examination of the issues. This then empowers aggressive leaders (McClure, 1996), potentially leading to resentment among staff, further augmented by any failure to address such behaviour, which ensures it becomes normalised.

A number of researchers have identified individuals and procedures in the work environment considered to be toxic, i.e. harmful leaders (Padilla et al., 2007; Pelletier, 2010) and those pursuing aggressive leadership (Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004). Some have also considered the potential for such a damaging working atmosphere to result in employee responses also becoming toxic (Frost, 2003), so leading to emotion-induced toxicity (Lawrence, 2008). In addition, others have alluded to their workplace as harmful, identifying contributing conditions

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such as interpersonal conflict (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010). Adverse working environments have been analysed from various points of view, although without any cohesive conclusion. A number of researchers have characterised these environments as arising from toxic conduct (Kusy and Holloway (2009, p. 2), while others have referred to the influence of a harmful personality (Bandura, 2002; Zimbardo, 2004; and Kusy and Holloway, 2009, p. 2. This highlights the need to undertake an in-depth examination of the prevalence of a toxic work environment across all aspects of the working experience.

The existing literature includes several taxonomies attempting to conceptualise a toxic working environment, which can help in understanding the kinds of activities and attitudes creating a workplace toxic. Previous research has concluded that a toxic intra-organisational atmosphere can be generated from a mixture of variables. 'Toxic' can thus be viewed as being distinguished by, but not restricted to: (1) a toxic character; (2) a toxic organisational culture; (3) a toxic culture promoted by management; and (4) a toxic workplace. Some features of the operational setting have also been defined by researchers as toxicity variables within the workforce. Such toxic workplaces not only encompass the general workplace atmosphere, but also the resulting adverse impact on staff. A number of studies have established that a worker's individual characteristics are crucial in determining his/her ethical conduct (Ford and Richardson, 1994; Loe et al., 2000). Lazear and Oyer (2007) indicated that, when it comes to the achievement of a firm's results, the choices made by employees are more significant than the giving of rewards. However, the motivation behind worker misconduct is

diverse, including evidence that rewards can play a highly significant role in promoting these behaviours.

Oberholzer-Gee and Wulf (2012) and Larkin (2014) pointed to three significant forms of toxic behaviour: (1) shaming; (2) active aggression; and (3) sabotage. Kusy and Holloway (2009, p. 4) described a toxic individual as "anyone who exhibited a trend of counterproductive job habits that weakened people, groups, and even organisations, over the lengthy course". A number of social science researchers, including Bandura (2002) and Zimbardo (2004), have postulated that this is not simply a case of an individual acting in a damaging manner, but that it is the responsibility of an environment within organisational systems enabling the continuation of such behaviour.

Toxic settings are comprised of a broad range of variables, one of which is the toxic workplace environment, which can include: (1) individuals focused on gaining and maintaining personal power; (2) narcissists; (3) manipulators; (4) bullies; (5) poisonous individuals; (6) the constant delivery of humiliation; and (7) toxic supervisors. Koehn (2007) defined such toxic conduct in the workplace as arising from the individual psychological makeup of specific individuals, including a self-centred disconnection with humanity and the subsequent breakdown of empathic relationships with others. Kusy and Holloway (2009, p. 2) described toxic habits as behavioural patterns undermining firstly, the productivity of organisations and secondly, the efficiency of working lives.

Brightman (2013) examined the following poisonous habits: (1) aggression; (2) narcissism; (3) a lack of confidence; and (4) passivity. Gilbert et al. (2012, p. 30) identified toxic environmental variables as including: (1) a climate in which

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there is a lack of trust; (2) adverse mental pressures; (3) elevated stress; and (4) a culture of incivility towards colleagues (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 30). Anderson (2013) identified various types of toxic actions as: (1) breaking down colleagues; (2) a passive-aggressive management style; (3) damaging gossip; (4) devious political manoeuvring; and (5) ongoing negativity.

A number of analysts have proposed several variables as contributing to adverse working environments, i.e. a lack of self-control, excessive demands from managers and an emphasis on self-advancement (Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino, Ivancevich and Konopaske, 2012, p. 30). A number of studies have highlighted the characteristics of a harmful working environment as including: (1) low levels of performance being given preference over merit-based recognition (Colligan and Higgins, 2006); (2) workers avoiding any potential for confrontation with administrators for fear of retaliation; (3) the viewing of individual well-being as less of a priority than the interests of the association (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003); (4) directors being continually nervous and with a tendency to lose their tempers; and (5) a high rate of employee turnover, particularly at management level (Macklem, 2005).

Hymowitz (2004) noted that, within a toxic environment, executives tend to solely focus on their own position and authority, i.e. by means of withholding important economic and tactical information from their subordinates. This can then overburden staff with work and tight deadlines, resulting in a poor work-life balance, i.e. employees are forced to put their work before all other considerations (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 30). Macklem (2005) indicated that a major cause of toxicity in the workplace consists of executives habitually setting irrational objectives, in order to accrue excessive earnings for themselves.

Siegel (2011) noted that toxic practices include oppressive supervision and bullying, such as: (1) openly mocking colleagues; (2) appropriating praise for work that has been completed by others; (3) unfair assigning of blame; (4) a visible lack of respect for others; and (5) acrimonious discussions. In addition, damaging conduct by an administrator (or in a peer-to-peer setting) has been found to take the form of harassment, i.e. sexual, racial, or religious (Cavaiola and Lavender, 2011). Lawrence (2014, p. 4) demonstrated that, once a director is known as a bully (i.e. engaging in conduct such as sexual harassment, making derogatory remarks, singling out the same individual on a regular basis, and using public embarrassment and intimidation), others in the workplace are also encouraged to engage in negative behaviour, in full knowledge that they will not face any resulting consequences. This can lead to administrators (or colleagues) taking credit for work done by others, as well as a prevalence of office gossip and false accusations levelled against colleagues. This can, in turn, result in a toxic workplace environment.

A number of analysts have underlined various indicators of toxicity as being related to leadership (i.e. singular attributes and characteristics) rather than the outcome of culture and atmosphere (Fitzpatrick, 2000). A small number of scientists have contended that a key variable is the long-term negative impact exerted on an organisation's culture and atmosphere by toxic leaders (Aubrey, 2012), indicating that these can be referenced as components of toxic conditions. Aubrey (2012, p. 3) highlighted that toxicity includes specific attributes and characteristics, along with the ways the culture of an organisation can pose a threat to its managers.

Lipman-Blumen (2005, p. 29) stated that the damaging practices and negative characteristics of toxic leaders can cause

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considerable suffering to individuals as well as damage to associations. Such practices can be prevented by senior managers acting in a timely manner, including threatening of serious consequences. However, a failure of management to address such practices can result in the work environment rapidly descending into a negative workplace, which can also lead to employees suing for constructive dismissal. Management is thus ultimately responsible for ensuring that employees can work free from toxic practices and (despite the difficulties encountered in terminating an employment contract), it may prove vital for the future of the company to remove any individual who has become the source of toxicity.

A number of difficulties can arise when engaged in healing a toxic workplace, particularly due to the need for strong management to transform a company's working culture. Management should always strive to ensure that workplace culture does not become toxic as a result of the destructive conduct of a small number of personnel, or a failure to recognise and/or acknowledge indications that something was amiss.

A workplace becomes toxic when those in authority are selfish and narcissistic and/or use unreasonable tools to bully, harass, threaten, and humiliate others. Such workplaces can trigger anxiety, pressure, depression, and high levels of illness. This is significant as a working atmosphere is comprised of the totality of employee interrelationships, i.e. technical, natural and voluntary. (Anderson, 2013). If left unchecked, toxicity can also lead to serious staffing issues such as: (1) frequent absences; (2) exhaustion; (3) destructive behaviour; and (4) declining productivity (Chuan, 2014).

The academic culture of a college is founded on the methods employed by leaders and workers to address any issues

that may arise, interact with students and staff, and deal with both success and failure. Such a community grows over time, by means of the development of a collection of views and principles holding the learning community together. The culture of a college is generally guided by the professional principles of being helpful, fostering personal development and encouraging success. However, various dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours, adverse traditions, and caustic methods of communicating can evolve, which act to form 'poisonous cultures' (Deal and Peterson, 1998, p. 10), i.e. "traditions and rituals that students maintain to create society and strengthen their principles" (Deal and Peterson, 1998, p. 10). In addition, Peterson (2002) stated that there tends to be a reduction in negative events (i.e. pupil misconduct and teachers' complaints) when cooperation takes place between administrators and employees. This promotes an atmosphere in which teaching and learning can thrive, resulting in a mainly positive classroom culture, benefiting both teachers and pupils.

Smirch (1983) viewed the culture of an organisation as a collection of meanings creating a unique philosophy (or persona), as demonstrated in the form of the faith, interaction, and language through which members are able to create (and maintain) their own vision of the world. Culture is influenced by principles and opinions capable of influencing the ways individuals cooperate, with a toxic culture therefore capable of undermining an entire organisation. Furthermore, in a situation demanding change, it can prove complex to create a blueprint for effective transition. Schein (2010) highlighted that opposition to change can take place when senior managers attempt to alter the behaviour of their subordinates, resulting in 'turf wars' and misunderstandings, as well as the prevention of effective interaction.

The values and culture of an organisation tend to direct firstly, its method of working and secondly conditions for its employees. The analysis and evaluation of such a culture reveals that senior personnel need to become instruments of transition, so transforming the environmental frames to monitor, distinguish, uncover and define methods of aligning and altering culture. Furthermore, leaders can introduce a blueprint containing policies for improving organisational efficiency, in particular by identifying the concrete and intangible environmental aspects embedded in toxic environments.

It is vital to evaluate harmful organisational culture at different stages. Schein (2010) noted that concentrations vary from the overt to the fundamental integrated, as well as subconscious expectations determining the nature of culture. It is therefore crucial for senior management to recognise all aspects of a culture to shift from a toxic environment to one that is supportive. A toxic society can, in the current global workplace, prove particularly damaging to an organisation, as well as its staff and its general performance. It is therefore vital that, as soon as a destructive organisational culture supersedes one that was previously favourable, leaders should rapidly intervene to prevent a rapidly increasing negative impact on the company's culture and principles. This highlights the need for leaders to guide (and cooperate with) others to transform environments that have become toxic into ones that are supportive. Bawany (2014) stated that the core challenge faced by contemporary leadership, particularly in capitalistic settings and social circumstances, is the ability to prevent uncertainty, confusion and a toxic atmosphere.

Leadership is constantly evolving both shaping and demanding innovation, while organisational leaders have an

obligation to generate and sustain a culture capable of generating a community spirit. It is therefore crucial for leaders to inspire and unite their employees by transforming the culture of their organisations from being toxic to positive. Kouzes and Posner (2012) argued that inspirational leaders understand that fostering a positive group environment promotes a feeling of continuity vital for empowering employees to achieve their goals. Thus, non-toxic workplaces are civilised environments, in which co-workers relate to each other in a positive manner, with a combination of formality and friendliness, separation and politeness.

This discussion has demonstrated that a negative impact on employees is characterised by their continual awareness of the adverse impact of negative circumstances, i.e. adversarial and/or coercive relationships and work-related social circumstances.

3. University culture

Academia has been significantly impacted by the recent and rapid growth in the number of colleges in East Asia. The progress of university education in this region has been both overt and implied, with the media and literature questioning the capacity of East Asian campuses, including their ability to break free from Western imperialism. It is important to acknowledge the significant social strides already made by East Asian cultures over the previous century in relation to higher education. However, it also has to be acknowledged that they continue to face a number of problems. A key element not previously addressed in the literature concerns the extent to which the toxic scholarly culture currently prevalent in the region has the potential to weaken these achievements.

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A widespread academic culture refers to the educational behaviours, beliefs and principles related to different elements of an academic's work. These exert a powerful impact on: (1) what is accomplished; (2) how it is achieved; (3) the identity of those engaged in such work; (4) emotional and personal choices (5) behaviour; and (6) interaction. Epithets such as 'honest' and 'ethical' have been used to define scholarly culture in East Asian colleges. However, such descriptions have also included a suggestion of the potential for fraud, with academic culture having been highlighted as a significant barrier to the achievement of a major global position for East Asian higher education. It is clear that a corrupt educational culture can harm the status of all related organisations, bringing them into disrepute. Such a toxic culture can exert a disastrous impact on the growth of higher education, including initiatives towards increased globalisation, thus resulting in both organisational and cultural bias and inefficiencies. Harmful practices can also have a negative impact on the morality of both individuals and organisations, so harming the educational environment of universities and damaging young minds. This issue is currently sufficiently severe as to prevent the development of cutting-edge science in the region, with widespread academic dishonesty having recently led to the imposition of state education measures emphasising factors inherent in the prevention of increased levels of research.

An extensive search by the current researcher revealed a lack of any previous studies examining the issue of toxic workplaces in the academic field in general, and in Saudi universities in particular. Instead, all existing studies focused on topics related to stress and satisfaction in the workplace, along

with organisational climate (Abu-Saad and Hendrix, 1995; Al-thenian, 2001; Al-obaid, 2002; A-noami, 2002; Alroyali, 2001).

The subject of toxicity is sensitive, in particular due to the prevailing belief that the academic atmosphere is free of some toxic aspects existing in other environments. However, it must be acknowledged that the academic atmosphere also has an issue relating to toxicity that needs be urgently addressed and treated by means of a clear scientific approach. This current study therefore explores the issue of toxicity in a Saudi Arabian University from the perspective of both its leaders and faculty members. The study firstly, identifies toxic behaviours and the characteristics of a toxic individual within the workplace. Secondly it examines the impact of toxic individuals on the workplace. Thirdly, it explores how leaders deal with toxic members of their organisations. Fourthly, it identifies whether any significant differences can be found between the responses of the study participants.

4. Methodology

This study was inspired by the researcher's own experience at academic institutions in Saudi Arabia. Having approached various posts with enthusiasm, she subsequently became disillusioned by the adverse atmosphere and issues pertaining to the presence of difficult personalities within the workplace. This led her attempt to understand this situation and identify whether she was the one with the problem, or if it was the workplace itself. This resulted in an examination of various aspects pertaining to psychology, referring to qualified and specialised researchers in order to understand whether some individuals in the workplace may be adversely impacted by negative personalities. When she was herself employed in a leadership position, the researcher observed (and dealt with)

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several individuals possessing adverse characteristics and who tended to create a toxic workplace. She was also able to understand the influence of toxicity on the environment of an organisation. Following several months of investigation, she found her personal observations were supported by a number of researchers, in particular Kusy and Holloway (2009), who provided deep insights into the phenomenon under study.

The researcher therefore developed a study questionnaire to address this phenomenon at MU based on the previous literature, as well as informal interviews with faculty members and leaders. The questionnaire focused on: (1) the features, behaviour and characteristics of a toxic individual; (2) the impact of toxicity on the workplace; and (3) the reactions of leaders towards toxic behaviour. The objective of the study was to firstly, assess the predictive validity of all leaders and faculty members at the university and secondly, deepen the wider understanding of the complex phenomena of toxicity at an educational institute. The researcher employed a mixed methods approach, using both a survey and interviews. The study was implemented in the following three phases:

Phase 1: Informal and unstructured interviews with ten leaders and ten faculty members from different sections at MU.

Phase 2: Formal interviews with six academic leaders from various universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Phase 3: A survey of 500 academic leaders and faculty members from different colleges at MU.

As only a small number of studies have previously examined the issue of toxic academic workplaces, the interviews were conducted in different colleges within MU. A number of

informal group discussions were also held with leaders and faculty members. These discussions commenced with participants discussing their own issues when dealing with difficult personalities, which prompted others to then share their experiences. Subsequent discussions also examined the difficulties encountered in dealing with toxic individuals within the Saudi system, i.e. in which all employees enjoy job security and academic leaders have limited authority, with a lack of any assessment currently in place for faculty members. The participants also highlighted the absence of any systematic programmes for managing toxicity in their workplaces.

This initial phase highlighted the need for a further in-depth examination of the issue of toxicity. Several questions were asked during the interviews to establish an understanding of all aspects of a toxic workplace. The interviews touched upon all primary points, including: (1) the features, behaviours and characteristics of toxic individuals; (2) the impact of toxicity on the workplace; and (3) the reaction of leaders towards toxicity.

A questionnaire was constructed for each applied axis, based on the information gained from interviews and the existing literature, including survey items used by Kusy and Holloway (2009). Some minor modifications were also made based on the findings. The survey focussed on determining the generalizability of the participants' experience, as well as refining the approach to understanding the complex phenomena related to a toxic situation.

A survey was also created, comprised of seventy-five items, including demographic information, a rating scale, and opportunities to comment on specific items. All questions were developed from the four primary themes identified in the interview analysis, along with the key findings in the literature

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review. MU has a total of 500 faculty numbers and leaders and
the survey was distributed to 500 of these, as well as others in
leadership positions. The return rate was 134%, with the
respondents being from different colleges within the university.

The data were subsequently analysed to determine the
most robust items useful for describing each of the primary
points in this study, as follows:

1. **The features, behaviour, and characteristics of toxic
   individuals.** The respondents were asked to describe the
   behaviour and characteristics of toxic colleagues in
   response to forty-three items drawn from the literature
   review. Participants were asked to indicate their responses
   on a Likert scale ranging from 'Very Frequently' to
   'Never'.

2. **The impact of toxicity on the workplace.** The
   respondents were asked to describe the impact of toxicity
   on the workplace in response to eighteen items drawn
   from the interviews and the literature review. Participants
   were asked to indicate their responses on a Likert scale
   ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'.

3. **Leader's reaction towards toxic behaviour.** The
   respondents were asked to describe leaders' reactions
   towards toxic behaviour in response to seventeen items
   drawn from the interviews and the literature review.
   Participants were asked to indicate their responses on a
   Likert scale ranging from 'not at all likely' to 'completely
   likely'.

5. Data analysis

Demographic variables

Table (1) Behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	**Male**	50	37.3%.
	female	84	62.7%.
	Total	134	100%.
Academic Rank	**Assistant Professor**	79	59.0%.
	lecturer	25	18.7%.
	Co- Professor	17	12.7%.
	Professor	9	6.7%.
	Teaching Assistant	3	2.2%.
	Administrative	1	0.7%.
	Total	134	100%.
The Administrative position at the University	**A faculty member without administrative position**	90	67.2%.
	Dean of the Deanship Support	18	13.4%.
	Dean OF the College	1	0.7%.

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	Head of the department	16	11.9%.
	College Vice dean	9	607%.
	Total	134	100%.
Years of work at the University	From 5 to less than 10 years	49	36.6%.
	10 years or more	61	45.5%.
	Less than 5 years	24	17.9%.
	Total	134	100%.
Scientific Field	Humanities and social sciences	56	41.8%.
	Medical Specialties	34	5.4%.
	Scientific Majors	44	32.8%.
	Total	134	100%.

Regarding demographic variables, some of the key findings in this study are as follows:

- 62.7% of the participants were female, with males accounting for 37.3%.

- Of the participants, the highest number were assistant professors (59%), followed by lecturers (18.7%), associate professors (12.7%) and teaching assistants (2.2%).

- The majority of faculty members did not hold administrative positions (67.2%), with most being Deans of Support Deanship (13.4%) and Heads of Departments (11.9%).

- The majority of faculty members (45.5%) had over ten years' service, followed by those with between five and ten years (36.6%). This reveals that most of the faculty examined had sufficient experience of working at the university.

- Up to 41.8% of respondents held specialisations in humanities and social sciences, while 32.8% worked in scientific fields.

All tool items were organized according to a five-point Likert scale as follows :(Very high, high, medium, low, very low), which have the following values, respectively:(5.4.3.2 and 1). The ranking degree on the open categories was made by calculating the range, which is the difference between the highest and the lowest degrees. Since the difference is (4), and by dividing it by (5), the category length becomes (0.80). Accordingly, the means to evaluate the students' responses on the instrument were as follows: as in the table

Table (2)

five-point Likert scale rating

rang	1-1.80	1.81-2.60	2.61-3.40	3.41-4.20	4.21-5.0
Degree of response	Very low	low	medium	high	Very high

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Behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals

Table (3) Behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
1	Aggressive activity against others	2.54	1.40	30	low
2	Create lobby for damage to others	2.52	1.41	31	low
3	Authoritarian tendencies	3.0	1.41	11	medium
4	Narcissism) vanity and excessive self-love	2.88	1.479	20	medium
5	Broadcast the negative spirit in different forms	2.83	1.478	21	medium
6	The presence of expected to have symptoms of mental illness	2.67	1.485	27	medium
7	Gossip	3.31	1.427	1	medium
8	Lack of trust in others	3.23	1.476	2	medium
9	Passive interference in teamwork	3.01	1.41	15	medium

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
10	Lack of interest in applying instructions and regulations	3.12	1.463	10	medium
11	Not accepting the other opinion	3.21	1.442	3	medium
12	Focus on other people's mistakes	3.21	1.458	4	medium
13	Fabrication of false and incorrect charges from others	2.746	1.423	22	medium
14	Underestimating the time and effort of others	3.067	1.472	13	medium
15	Underestimating others verbally or non-verbally	2.880	1.445	26	medium
16	Financial corruption in all its forms	2.428	1.201	32	Low
17	Administrative corruption in all its forms	2.559	1.3065	29	low
18	Blackmailing others (students - colleagues or others)	2.303	1.152	33	low
19	Unexplained rage	2.669	1.4180	28	medium

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		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
	eruptions				
20	Jealousy of distinguishing others	3.197	1.304	5	medium
21	Lying	2.962	1.400	17	medium
22	Lack of social intelligence in dealing with others	3.186	1.487	6	medium
23	Faith in conspiracy theory	2.893	1.499	19	medium
24	Drop personal problems on students and colleagues	2.701	1.461	25	medium
25	Intellectual theft	2.744	1.363	23	medium
26	Loss of rights in all its forms	2.757	1.393	24	medium
27	Resistance to change	3.053	1.468	12	medium
28	Exclusivity and achievements attributed to non-owners	2.902	1.429	18	medium
29	Issuing decisions from entities that do not see the field in its natural state due to	3.137	1.453	9	medium

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
	the state of complete isolation among decision-makers, men and women				
30	Unqualified persons hold sensitive leadership positions	3.172	1.453	7	medium
31	Ignore scientifically distinguished personalities	3.045	1.440	14	medium
32	Blurred vision and increased administrative burdens due to excessive bureaucracy	3.165	1.409	8	medium
33	Superficial thinking and an intellectual gap between members	3.097	1.434	11	medium
	General mean	2.915			medium

Regarding to Behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals, the results reveal a general mean of 2.915 (medium). Although the general degree of response is not high, this result exposes a critical level of toxicity and decision makers should be concerned about this outcome and its effects

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on the organisation. The results also reveal that 'Engaging in gossip' ranked first (with a mean of 3.31, medium), followed by 'Lack of trust in others' (with a mean of 3.23, medium), while 'Blackmailing others (students, colleagues, or others)' ranked last (with a mean of 2.30, low). The behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals are listed as follows:

1. Engaging in gossip.

2. Lack of trust in others.

3. Failing to accept others' opinions.

4. Focusing on others' mistakes.

5. Jealousy of others.

6. A lack of social intelligence when dealing with others.

7. Unqualified persons holding sensitive leadership positions.

8. Blurred vision and increased administrative burdens owing to excessive bureaucracy.

9. Issuing decisions from entities who have not observed the field in its natural state, owing to the state of complete isolation among decision-makers, both men and women.

10. Lack of interest in applying instructions and regulations.

11. Authoritarian tendencies.

12. Underestimating the time and effort of others.

The effect of harmful behaviours on the work environment

Table (4) The effect of harmful behaviours on the work environment

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
1	Low productivity at the enterprise level	2.63	1.62	7	medium
2	Low productivity at the individual level	2.54	1.55	9	Low
3	Increased frustration	2.42	1.49	14	Low
4	Feeling insecure	2.488	1.43	11	Low
5	Undermine self-confidence	2.96	1.55	2	medium
6	The existence of a hostile work environment	2.76	1.55	6	medium
7	Lack of attraction to work in harmful environment	2.19	1.28	17	Low
8	The impact on the welfare of the individual and the stability of his personal life	2.515	1.42	10	Low

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		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
9	**Increased anxiety**	**2.41**	**1.40**	**15**	**Low**
10	**Suffering from depression**	**2.877**	**1.61**	**5**	**medium**
11	**Suffering from extreme exhaustion**	**2.40**	**1.47**	**16**	**Low**
12	**Financial crises in the work environment**	**2.87**	**1.51**	**4**	**medium**
13	**Financial crises for people**	**2.91**	**1.59**	**3**	**medium**
14	**Decreased self-esteem**	**3.11**	**1.52**	**1**	**medium**
15	**Low level of innovation and creativity**	**2.44**	**1.52**	**13**	**Low**
16	**Loss of trust between the members of the institution**	**2.46**	**1.43**	**12**	**Low**
17	**Decreased level of values and good morals**	**2.52**	**1.50**	**8**	**Low**
General mean		**2.618**			**medium**

Regarding to the impact of harmful behaviours on the working environment, the results reveal a general mean of 2.618 (medium). As discussed on the previous table, a medium result is concerning and should be dealt with carefully. The results also reveal that 'Decreased self-esteem' ranked first (with a mean of 3.11, medium); 'Undermining self-confidence' (with a mean of 2.96, medium) was second; 'Financial crises among individuals' was third (with a mean of 2.91, medium); and fourth was 'Financial crises in the work environment' (with a mean of 2.87, medium). In addition, 'Lack of interest around working in a harmful environment' ranked last (with a mean of 2.19, low). The list below presents the most harmful behaviours and characteristics in descending order:

1. Decreased self-esteem.

2. Undermining of self-confidence.

3. Financial crises among individuals.

4. Financial crises in the work environment.

5. Suffering from depression.

6. The existence of a hostile work environment.

7. Low productivity at the enterprise level.

8. Decreased levels of values and good morals.

9. Low productivity at the individual level.

10. The impact on the welfare of the individual and stability in his/her personal life.

11. Feeling insecure.

12. Loss of trust among members of the institution.

13. Low levels of innovation and creativity.

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14. Increased frustration.

15. Increased anxiety.

16. Extreme exhaustion.

17. Lack of interest around working in a harmful environment.

The reaction of leaders towards toxic behaviour.

Table (5) The reaction of leaders towards toxic behaviour.

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
1	**Talk to the toxic individual about negative behaviour caused**	**2.03**	**1.15**	**15**	**Low**
2	**Mitigating the causes of harmful behaviours**	**2.53**	**1.29**	**4**	**Low**
3	**Communicating clear criteria to the toxic individual**	**2.42**	**1.31**	**7**	**Low**
4	**Avoiding contact and discussions with the toxic individual**	**2.27**	**1.24**	**13**	**Low**
5	**Focusing on the agendas of the institution and ignoring the private agenda of the toxic individual**	**2.37**	**1.265**	**10**	**Low**

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
6	**Consulting an impartial individual within the organisation on ways of dealing with the toxic individual**	**2.47**	**1.30**	**5**	**Low**
7	**Requesting an external consultant**	**2.62**	**1.28**	**3**	**medium**
8	**Documenting evidence, and punishing the individual according to established rules and regulations**	**2.35**	**1.26**	**11**	**Low**
9	**Having a detailed discussion on the extent of the influence of the toxic individual on others**	**1.97**	**1.16**	**16**	**Low**
10	**Forming a committee of professionals to address the toxic individual**	**2.74**	**1.35**	**1**	**medium**
11	**Documenting and sending formal notifications to senior leaders of the organisation**	**2.42**	**1.31**	**8**	**Low**
12	**Managing the negative impact of the toxic individual on everyday work**	**2.27**	**1.24**	**14**	**Low**

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		Mean	Std. Deviation	Arra	Degree of response
13	**Excluding the toxic individual from important decisions**	**2.37**	**1.26**	**9**	**Low**
14	**Isolating the toxic individual from positive and active employees**	**2.47**	**1.30**	**6**	**Low**
15	**Leave the organisation**	**2.62**	**1.28**	**2**	**medium**
16	**Absorb the harmful individual**	**2.35**	**1.26**	**12**	**Low**
General mean		**2.392**			**Low**

Regarding to the reaction of leaders towards toxic behaviour, the results reveal a general mean of 2.392 (low). They also reveal that 'Forming a committee of professionals to address the toxic person' ranked first (with a mean of 2.74, medium), second was 'Leaving the organisation' (a mean of 2.62, medium). 'Requesting an external consultant' (with a mean of 2.62, medium) came third and 'Mitigating the causes for toxic behaviour' ranked fourth (with a mean of 2.53, low). 'Talking to the individual about their bad and negative behaviour' was second to last, (with a mean of 2.03, low), with the last ranked being 'Having a detailed discussion on the extent of a toxic individual's influence on others' (with a mean of 1.97, low).

The list in order is as follows:

1. Forming a committee of professionals to address the harmful individual.

2. Leaving the organisation.

3. Requesting an external consultant.

4. Mitigating the causes of toxic behaviour.

5. Consulting an honest individual within the organisation on ways of dealing with the toxic individual.

6. Isolating a toxic individual from positive and active employees.

7. Communicating clear criteria to the toxic individual.

8. Documenting and sending formal notifications to senior leaders in the organisation.

9. Excluding the toxic individual from important decisions.

10. Focusing on the agendas of the institution and ignoring the private agenda of the toxic individual.

11. Documenting evidence, and punishing the offender according to established rules and regulations.

12. Absorbing the harmful individuals.

13. Avoiding contact and discussions with the toxic individual.

14. Managing the negative impact on the workplace of the toxic individual.

15. Discussing with the offender the negative behaviour he/she is causing.

16. Holding a detailed discussion concerning the extent of the toxic individual's influence on others

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study focused on the context of a Saudi University to: (1) identify the behaviours and characteristics of toxic members in the workplace; (2) understand the impact of a toxic member within a workplace; (3) understand how leaders manage toxic individuals; and (4) examine research participants' views. It comprised of a seventy-five-item based on previous interviews. The survey was distributed to 500 of faculty members at different colleges at MU, including those in leadership positions. The return rate was 330. The results identified several behaviours and characteristics common to toxic members in the workplace: prevalence of gossip, lack of confidence in others, and failure to accept others' opinions were the most prevalent. This result differed from the literature which identifies key features as: (1) bullying, (2) harassment, (3) excessively long working hours, (4) the absence of good working relationships between colleagues, (5) isolation, (6) conflict, (7) negative competition between workers, (8) ambiguity, (9) excessive workload, and (10) a lack of leadership. This suggests toxic workplace behaviours differ between contexts and countries, possibly due to cultural and philosophical differences.

Reportedly, the presence of toxic members within a workplace lower workers' self-esteem, undermine confidence and can even create financial crises. Leaders surveyed reacted by either forming a committee of professionals to manage the toxic individual, leaving the organisation, requesting the services of an external consultant, or reducing perceived contributors to harmful behaviour. The research recommends creating a committee of professionals to address the behaviour of toxic individuals and identify suitable external consultants. In

light of these results, the researcher recommends the following actions to address the negative impact of the presence of toxic individuals in the workplace in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

1. Promote social intelligence in dealing with others;

2. Recruit qualified individuals for sensitive leadership positions;

3. Ensure clarity of vision and awareness of increasing administrative burdens owing to excessive bureaucracy;

4. Promote positivity and coordinate decisions with decision-makers of both sexes;

5. Focus on the application of instructions and regulations;

6. Increase the time and effort of others;

7. Create attractive environments in which to work;

8. Increase rest times, to ensure workers do not become over-tired;

9. Promote creativity and innovation in the working environment;

10. Increase welfare opportunities for individuals to stabilise their personal lives;

11. Ensure employees feel safe at work;

12. Form committees of professionals to address the issue of toxic individuals within the workplace;

13. Request the assistance of external consultants when required;

14. Mitigate identifiable causes of toxic behaviour;

15. Consult impartial individuals within the organisation to identify ways of dealing with toxic individuals;

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16. Isolate toxic individuals from positive and active workers;

17. Communicate clear expectations to toxic individuals; and

18. Document official notifications and send them to the organisation's senior leaders.

19. Do more qualitative research about the results related to demographic variables specially gender participance where 62.7% of the participants were female.

Finally, I recommend additional research focusing on the toxic workplace to explore the relationship between toxic workplaces and productivity, and specifically its relationship with research productivity among faculty members in higher education. More studies are required in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world more generally, as the literature review found the majority of existing research was conducted in western countries (i.e. Appelbaum et al. (2007), Brown (2004), Dyck et al. (2001), Goldman (2006), and Ghosh et al. (2011)). Regarding to Behaviour and harmful characteristics of some individuals in this study, the results reveal a general mean of 2.915 (medium). Although the general degree of response is not high, this result exposes a critical level of toxicity and further research should be implemented qualitatively to understand the concept toxic workplace at university level deeply. which should be high level in performance and behaviour as well.

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