



Investigating toxic leadership's influence on employee turnover intention in a clinical research organisation

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Orientation: This study examines the impact of toxic leadership (TL) on employees' intentions to leave a South African clinical research organisation (CRO) and how organisational culture (OC) mediates this relationship.

Research purpose: The research aimed to evaluate how toxic leadership behaviours affect employee turnover intentions (TIs) and determine to what extent OC mediates this relationship.

Motivation for the study: In the context of CROs, the negative impact of TL on the retention and health of employees and organisations, in the case described in this article, is crucial to understand and mitigate.

Research approach/design and method: This study used a quantitative and cross-sectional correlational design to collect data on employee perceptions of TL and OC within the CRO.

Main findings: Toxic leadership significantly impacts employee TIs, and the OC is an essential mediator in this relationship.

Practical/managerial implications: The results highlighted the need for organisations to address toxic leadership and to actively cultivate a positive OC to improve employee retention and reduce TIs.

Contribution/value-add: This research provides empirical evidence of toxic leadership's impact on TIs and the extent to which OC mediates this relationship. It reveals how OC mediates this relationship. The study contributes to the widest literature on leadership and organisational behaviour. It provides valuable insights into management practices for improving organisational health and employee well-being.

Keywords: toxic leadership; organisational culture; turnover intention; clinical research organisation; abusive supervision; employee retention.

Introduction

Orientation

Contemporary workplaces are affected by leadership dynamics, which play an important role in shaping workplace environments and employee behaviours (Tsai, 2011). In recent years, toxic leadership (TL) has attracted a lot of attention in the literature because it has a negative impact on organisations. Toxic leadership is characterised by harmful behaviours and practices of leaders, such as authoritarian leadership, abusive supervision, self-promotion, narcissism and uncertainty. These behaviours significantly impact the attitudes and behaviours of employees in the organisation (Schmidt, 2014). Toxic leadership was associated with higher employee turnover rates, which could destabilise an organisation and increase recruitment, training and productivity losses (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). Therefore, scholars and practitioners must understand the relationship between TL and employee turnover intentions (TIs) (Bakkal et al., 2019; Hattab et al., 2021; Naeem & Khurram, 2020; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020).

However, the impact of TL on employee TI varies from organisation to organisation (Bakkal et al., 2019; Hattab et al., 2021; Naeem & Khurram, 2020; Paltu & Bouwers, 2020). Consequently, it is crucial to study whether organisational culture (OC) mitigates or exacerbates the impact of TL on employee TIs. Organisational culture refers to a company's common beliefs, values and customs that can significantly impact employee behaviour (Ghosh & Srivastava, 2014, p. 584). Previous studies have documented the negative impact of TL on TI (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020;

Schmidt, 2008, 2014). Still, there is a research gap regarding the impact of TL on South Africa's clinical research industry. Furthermore, the effects of OC on the relationship between TL and TI of employees have not been thoroughly investigated in South Africa. Therefore, it is necessary to study the impact of TL on TI and OC staff in a Clinical Research Organisation (CRO) to improve employee retention rates and maintain the authenticity of clinical research results. The problem under study is the limited understanding of how TL behaviour affects employee TI in different organisational contexts, especially in CROs in South Africa. Negative leadership behaviours such as abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion and predictability may be harmful. In addition, there are gaps in research into how OC can mitigate the impact of TL on the TI of employees in South African CROs.

Research purpose and objectives

This study investigates the impact of TL on TI for South African CRO employees and explores how OC can mediate this impact. The study aims to fully understand how TL behaviours affect employees' willingness to remain at work and how OC can alleviate or exacerbate this effect. The study is multi-dimensional and examines the entire organisation. Its objectives include measuring employees' perception of TL levels, employee turnover plans and CRO's OC. Furthermore, the study investigates the interaction between TL, OC and TI to understand better how these variables interact and influence employee experiences. The study also aims to determine whether OC could mediate TL and TI relations and provide potential interventions to mitigate the negative impact of TL on employee welfare. This study aims to provide valuable insights to improve leadership practices and OC in the CRO and beyond and reduce turnover rates.

Literature review

The study examined how TL (an independent variable) influences TI (a dependent variable) and the role of OC as a mediator.

Toxic leadership

Schmidt's model is the theoretical basis of TL in this study. Schmidt's TL model defines five key aspects: self-promotion, abuse of supervision, narcissism, unpredictable leadership and authoritarian leadership. This model is based on empirical research to define and validate TL. Schmidt (2008) points out that toxic leaders orient themselves to the priority of their reputation and well-being over their employees, which has a negative impact on creativity and innovation. Abusive supervision involves persistent hostile and non-verbal behaviours, while the leader's narcissism is characterised by arrogance, dominance and the desire for power and admiration. Authoritarian leaders exercise excessive control and force obedience, while unpredictable leaders create a volatile workplace through inconsistent behaviours (Schmidt, 2008, 2014).

The literature on TL reveals a complex phenomenon characterised by behaviours and traits that significantly influence employee well-being and OC. Negative behaviours can be attributed to TL, such as instilling fear, behaving unpredictably and neglecting employee welfare (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Reed, 2004). Leadership characterised by toxicity has been associated with adverse organisational outcomes, such as reduced employee satisfaction, diminished creativity and increased TIs. Several studies have demonstrated the harmful effects of TL on various aspects of organisational performance. For instance, TL in higher education can destroy OC and employee morale (Budak & Erdal, 2022). Fan et al. (2023) highlighted that TL in healthcare significantly impacts organisational performance because nurses feel bullied into silence, affecting nurse and patient outcomes. In organisational settings, TL increases burnout, decreases job satisfaction and raises TIs (Budak & Erdal, 2022). Cyberloafing increases among employees as a result of emotional exhaustion caused by TL, with organisational commitment moderating this effect (Fan et al., 2023). A study by Ofei et al. (2023) found that job satisfaction can contribute to nurses wanting to quit their jobs because of the negative impacts of TL. According to a survey by Paltu and Brouwers (2020), TL behaviours are commonly experienced and significantly impact employee job satisfaction, commitment and intention to leave among South African manufacturing sector workers. The study highlights the need for organisations to address TL and promote healthy leadership practices to improve employee well-being and retention (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). Klahn Acuña and Male (2022) found that TL can negatively affect employee behaviour and commitment towards the organisation. Specifically, their research suggests that TL leads to counterproductive work behaviours and decreased organisational commitment. These findings highlight the importance of promoting positive and healthy organisational leadership practices. Paltu and Brouwers (2020) state that TL has significantly impacted public organisations, leading to higher employee turnover rates and counterproductive behaviour. Suryosukmono et al. (2023) have emphasised that the impact of TL on employee well-being and organisational effectiveness is significant. According to their findings, it leads to high levels of job stress and poor work-life balance. Additionally, leaders with toxic traits undermine employee confidence and loyalty, significantly impacting organisational trust and effectiveness (Milosevic et al., 2020). Employees exposed to TL show decreased job satisfaction and organisational commitment, increasing turnover rates (Semedo et al., 2022). Toxic leadership exacerbates workplace stress and diminishes employee engagement and productivity (Wolor et al., 2024). High levels of TL are linked to poor job performance, high stress levels and increased employee TIs (Nonehkaran et al., 2023). Toxic leadership directly reduces organisational trust and significantly increases employee TIs (Lee et al., 2024). The negative impact of TL can be observed in several aspects of job satisfaction, ultimately leading to decreased individual and organisational performance (Sabino et al., 2024).

Toxic leadership practices result in poor job satisfaction, high TIs and overall detrimental impacts on OC (Türkmen Keskin & Özduyan Kiliç, 2024). Toxic leadership affects job satisfaction and organisational trust, leading to higher employee TIs (Boddy, 2023; Türkmen Keskin & Özduyan Kiliç, 2024). Toxic leadership has negatively impacted OC, including decreased employee morale and increased turnover (Saleem & Ilkhanizadeh, 2021). According to Octavian (2023), it has a range of adverse effects on employees, including reduced job satisfaction, increased stress and higher intentions to leave their jobs. In other words, it can directly impact employee well-being and retention. Negatively, it affects multiple dimensions of organisational performance, such as employee turnover, job satisfaction, trust and overall morale. Toxic leadership can have a negative impact on the entire organisation. Such leadership can cause a decline in employee satisfaction and loyalty, create a lack of trust in management and bring down employee morale across the organisation.

Organisational culture

Ghosh and Srivastava's (2014) OC model, selected as the theoretical foundation of this study, offers a practical framework for understanding OC. The model identifies several dimensions, including values, beliefs, norms and practices, which collectively shape the environment of an organisation. This model underscores the importance of shared social behaviour and the influence of leadership on OC. It elucidates how culture is formed, maintained and changed, impacting employee behaviour and organisational outcomes. The model has been instrumental in assessing the cultural aspects that mediate the relationship between TL and the intention to transfer employees (Ghosh & Srivastava, 2014).

The literature on OC emphasises its critical role in shaping attitudes, behaviours and the overall organisational environment. Organisational culture is 'the shared values, beliefs and practices that influence how individuals within an organisation interact with each other and the external environment' (Bamidele, 2022). Organisational culture plays a partial mediator role, suggesting that shaping cultural norms can influence the extent of TL's impact (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). Başkan's (2020) comprehensive research on education reveals that TL is a prominent issue in higher education. This type of leadership has a strong link with adverse consequences such as decreased employee morale, efficiency and job satisfaction. The study also shows that OC is critical in fostering or mitigating the effects of TL (Başkan, 2020). Moreover, Gupta and Chawla (2024) state that TL is prevalent and significantly impacts employee morale, productivity and OC. Their study highlights the importance of addressing TL in organisational settings (Gupta & Chawla, 2024). The survey conducted by Widodo et al. (2021) has demonstrated that enhancing the OC can effectively lower the probability of nurses quitting their jobs.

Tiwari and Jha (2022) conducted research which shows that narcissism plays a significant role in creating a hostile work environment and in promoting abusive supervision. The study also indicates that the relationship between narcissism and organisational misconduct is influenced by toxic work culture and abusive supervision. Furthermore, Monteiro and Joseph (2023) found that positive workplace cultures are linked with better mental health outcomes, while toxic workplace cultures correlate with adverse mental health outcomes such as stress, anxiety and burnout. The study emphasises the importance of fostering a positive workplace culture to promote employee well-being (Monteiro & Joseph, 2023). Mesha's (2023) study reveals that OC, compensation and professional growth opportunities significantly impact employee retention and that work-life balance is critical in maintaining employee loyalty and reducing turnover.

Turnover intention

As applied in this study, the job embeddedness theory focuses on how employees feel connected to their jobs and organisations. This theory posits that the more embedded employees are in their jobs, the less likely they are to leave. Embeddedness is influenced by factors such as fit with the organisation, links to other individuals and the perceived sacrifices associated with leaving the job. This theory helps to understand how TL can disrupt these connections, thereby increasing TI (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Omar et al. (2015) and Oni and Fatoki (2017) describe TI as a psychological withdrawal from an organisation, often a thoughtful and deliberate decision influenced by dissatisfaction with the job or workplace. Different factors can impact the intention to leave a job, including leadership styles, commitment to the organisation, job satisfaction, workplace ethical environment, disrespectful behaviour at work, stress related to the job and demographic and cultural factors (Gan & Voon, 2021; Guzeller & Celiker, 2020; Lee, 2022; Li & Yao, 2022; Namin et al., 2022; Simha & Pandey, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). It has been found that transformational leadership styles can significantly enhance job satisfaction and reduce the probability of employees quitting their jobs. This is especially true in software development and nursing environments, as these leadership styles foster trust and loyalty to the organisation (Gan & Voon, 2021; Simha & Pandey, 2021). Fostering trust among employees is significantly reduced by ethical climates perceived as principled or benevolent, particularly in healthcare settings where ethical considerations are paramount. Simha and Pandey (2021) found that implementing ethical climates can effectively decrease the inclination to quit a job. This discovery implies that an established ethical atmosphere can lower the intention to leave a job. Job satisfaction has also been identified as a critical determinant of TIs across all sectors, with leadership quality, organisational support and ethical climates being key factors influencing job satisfaction (Lee, 2022; Xu et al., 2023). Recent studies have shown that

TIs are significantly increased by workplace incivility and job stress, particularly among teachers and intensive care unit (ICU) nurses (Li & Yao, 2022; Namin et al., 2022). Factors related to demographics and culture can influence an employee's intention to leave a company. Younger employees and those from collectivist cultures may have different TIs because of varying perspectives on leadership and organisational support (Li & Yao, 2022; Simha & Pandey, 2021). Thus, addressing these various factors comprehensively is crucial for reducing turnover and enhancing organisational stability.

Relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention

Research has consistently shown that TL significantly impacts employees' intention to leave the organisation (Akca, 2017). According to several studies, TL strongly predicts employees' intention to leave their jobs (Bakkal et al., 2019; Ofei et al., 2023). Moreover, TL can increase TI directly and indirectly via its negative impact on psychological well-being and employee engagement (Naeem & Khurram, 2020). The presence of TL is directly linked to the intention of employees to leave their jobs and their tendency to display counterproductive work behaviour. According to Hattab et al. (2022), this relationship is partially mediated by the intention of employees to leave their jobs. Nurses' perception of TL has also been found to negatively correlate with organisational trust and positively correlate with TI (Türkmen Keskin & Özduyan Kiliç, 2024). Leadership with despotic tendencies is toxic and can cause employees to consider leaving their jobs. This is because of the hostile work environment and distractions caused by the leadership style (Iqbal et al., 2022). Additionally, Vahdati et al. (2020) have suggested that TL can directly and indirectly lead to employee turnover by creating organisational obstacles. The influence of TL traits on TIs varies across cultural typologies (Justino, 2022). The existing research on toxic and despotic leadership highlights its adverse impacts on organisational health and employee well-being (Khizar et al., 2023; Mukarram et al., 2021).

Mediator role of organisational culture

As the literature suggests, the complex relationship between TL and employee TI is mediated by OC. Organisational culture significantly impacts employee behaviour and organisational outcomes, highlighting the intricate interplay between the three factors. Saleem and Ilkhanizadeh (2021) postulate that OC encompasses the norms, beliefs and values created within organisations that employees follow in their daily duties. Toxic leadership, characterised by behaviours that undermine employee well-being and morale, can significantly alter the OC, creating environments where fear, retaliation and unreasonable demands prevail (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020; Singh & Ruta, 2018). This alteration in culture profoundly influences employees' TIs. Positive and supportive OCs can mitigate TIs by fostering a sense of belonging, engagement and alignment with organisational

goals (Lee & Kim, 2023). In contrast, toxic cultures, marked by stress, lack of support and poor employee well-being, exacerbate TIs (Rasool et al., 2021). Different dimensions of OC, such as emphasis on career development, collaboration and employee development, can influence TIs to varying degrees (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). The connection between OC and TI is affected by various factors, including leadership styles, perceived organisational support, organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Mabasa et al., 2016; Van Rooij & Fine, 2018). In summary, a company's culture is vital in reducing employee TI caused by TL. Organisational culture acts as a way to understand and examine the impact of leadership behaviour on employee outcomes, specifically TIs. This mediation emphasises the significance of building a positive OC to counter the detrimental effects of TL and decrease TI.

Gaps in the literature

The existing research has several critical gaps concerning the influence of TL on employee TI and the mediating role of OC. These gaps include a lack of focus on cultural variations in Eastern and non-Western settings, which limits a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics (Khizar et al., 2023). There is also a significant absence of empirical studies on despotic leadership, especially in academic and research environments where hierarchical structures may amplify negative effects (Mukarram et al., 2021). Furthermore, the specific mechanisms and influential cultural components related to how OC can mediate the effects of TL remain underexplored despite some existing studies suggesting its potential (Mashile et al., 2021). The literature also presents inconsistent findings regarding which TL traits are most detrimental, indicating the need for further research to clarify these impacts across different contexts (Choi & Kim, 2020). Additionally, the predominance of cross-sectional studies suggests a need for longitudinal research to understand long-term effects (Widodo et al., 2021). The lack of sector-specific research is also evident, which is crucial for developing tailored interventions (Khizar et al., 2023; Mashile et al., 2021). Finally, the need for comprehensive models that integrate multiple mediators and moderators is emphasised to fully capture these relationships' complexity (Mukarram et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps will provide a deeper understanding and inform effective organisational policies and practices.

Research paradigm

Kuhn introduced the term paradigm in 1962 to describe a philosophical mode of thinking. A paradigm for research represents the researcher's convictions, opinions and values that steer their viewpoint of the world (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Positivism, which holds that reality exists outside of human influence, underpins this study (Rehman & Alharthi, 2015). The researcher employs the positivist view of reality, a theory of objectivity in knowledge and a method of controlling variables to prove the causal connection between TL, company culture and TI (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Saunders et al., 2016).

Research methodology

According to Bryman (2012), quantitative research is a technique that seeks to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The research study conducted here employed the quantitative research approach. The positivist paradigm's method precisely describes the parameters and coefficients in the collected, analysed and interpreted data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Through this method, a better understanding of the relationship between TL, TI and OC can be achieved. Therefore, quantitative research was deemed the most appropriate approach for this study.

Research design

This study used a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data through online questionnaires distributed via Google Forms (Creswell, 2013; Mishra & Alok, 2018). The study validated TL, TI and OC scales, and closed-ended questions were used to understand better individuals' perspectives on the concept or topic of interest (Creswell, 2013). The time horizon of this study was cross-sectional, as it aimed to investigate research samples at a specific period (Bryman & Bell, 2014; Collis & Hussey, 2014; Melnikovas, 2018).

Study's target population

The target population is the people from whom the research study will be conducted and conclusions drawn (Urdu, 2011). This research study targeted employees at a selected South African CRO. The population included all lower-level managers and/or supervisors, while directors, executives and higher management were excluded.

Sampling method and size

The act of selecting a subset of a larger population for analysis is referred to as the sampling method (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Despite the study's quantitative design, a CRO was chosen through purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling. According to Valerio et al. (2016:146), purposive sampling comprises the deliberate selection of a specific group of people with the qualities needed for the study. The purposive sampling method allowed the researcher to create a sample representative of the total population of interest.

The researcher conducted a census at one CRO, which allowed the researcher to achieve generalisability and make probabilistic predictions (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). The concept of generalisability implies that the outcome of a study can be applied to a more significant population than the sample used to obtain the results (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Bryman, 2012). Bryman (2012) defines sample size as the study's total number of observations or participants. Owing to the small population, a census was done on the total population of 650. Data were collected from 254 participants from a sample population (sample size) of 650 employees. The survey link

was sent to the employees who participated in the research study by the human resources manager who acts as a gatekeeper.

Measuring instruments

The study used Schmidt's (2008) TL scale, Ghosh and Srivastava's (2014) OC scale, and Roodt's (2004) TI scale modified by Bothma and Roodt (2013). These instruments were chosen for their validated reliability and relevance to the research objectives.

The TL scale consists of 5 dimensions and 30 items: abusive supervision (7 items) to assess how managers engage with their employees; authoritarian leadership (6 items) to evaluate the manager's control over employees; narcissism (5 items) to assess the manager's explosiveness and feeling of dominance over employees; self-promotion (5 items) to measure the manager's interpersonal expression behaviour to improve their image at the expense of employees; and unpredictability (7 items) to measure how inconsistent behaviour of managers affects employees (Schmidt, 2008).

This study used the 18-item measurement scale developed and validated by Ghosh and Srivastava (2014) to measure OC. The OC scale measurement included the following dimensions: participation (four items) to measure whether employees are encouraged to speak out and express their views; respect for the individual (three items) to measure the sense of equality; action orientation (three items) to measure members' efforts towards achieving the organisational goal; trust (three items) to measure trust among members; openness (two items) to measure whether members exercise open communication with the organisation; and power distance (three items) to measure whether managers exercise power and employees avoid confrontation (Ghosh & Srivastava, 2014).

Employees' intentions to leave the organisations were measured using the scale developed by Roodt (2004). Bothma and Roodt (2013) modified the 15-item scale established by Roodt (2004) and reduced it to 6 items. This study used the 6-item scale to measure how often employees intend to leave their organisations.

Reliability of the measuring instruments

Various steps were taken to ensure that the research instruments were reliable. Reliability is the instruments' capacity to produce similar results when used in different settings (Bryman, 2012). This is used to evaluate the quality of other research conducted. Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the internal consistency of the research instrument (Bryman, 2012). This determines whether the scales used in this study are reliable. According to Pallant (2010), a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 or higher is acceptable. However, Pacleb and Cabanda (2014), Pallant (2010) and Pevalin and Robson (2009) reported that lower Cronbach's alpha coefficients could be expected for constructs with fewer items. As a result, the reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients

(0.61–0.90) indicate the constructs' reliability. Schmidt (2014) found the TL scale reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93 for abusive supervision, 0.89 for authoritarian leadership, 0.88 for narcissism, 0.91 for self-promotion and 0.92 for unpredictability. Ghosh and Srivastava (2014) tested the OC scale and found the scale reliable, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86. Bothma and Roodt (2013) tested the 6-item TI scale and found that the scales were reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.80.

Data analysis

The statistical analysis for this study was conducted using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 29.0.1.1 (IBM SPSS, 2023) and Amos™ version 29.0.1.1 for Microsoft Windows (Amos, 2023), which employed descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation (SD), as well as inferential statistics. The reliability of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. To determine the relationships between the constructs (TL, OC and TI), Spearman correlations (r) were calculated, where values close to -1 represented negative relationships, 0 represented no relationship, and values close to $+1$ represented positive relationships (Struwig & Stead, 2013).

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to evaluate the mediating role of OC. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was used as a guideline for interpretation, where values closer to 0.05 indicated a good fit and values up to 0.008 indicated an acceptable fit. Values closer to 0.95 or higher indicated a good fit for the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) (Kline, 2015). A multiple regression analysis was performed using the SPSS programme to determine the independent variables that predict the dependent variable. In this study, the dependent variable is TI, the independent variable is TL and the mediating variable is OC.

Ethical considerations

The North-West University's Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) approved this study, with the study approval number being NWU-00598-23-A4. To participate in the study, the participants were required to provide written consent, which involved informing them about the study's purpose, ensuring their anonymity and detailing their rights. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained by de-identifying their information, securely storing the data and destroying it after 5 years, in compliance with the *Protection of Personal Information (POPIA) Act No. 4 of 2013* (South Africa, 2023). The data were anonymised; only authorised personnel had access to it, and the findings were also anonymised to protect the identities of individuals.

Results

In this study, the characteristics of the respondents included age, gender, job category (occupation) and highest qualifications. The factors that were considered for this study are represented in Table 1. However, only gender, age group and job category (post-level) were used to analyse this research study. According to Table 1, the most significant proportion of respondents (52.6%) were women compared to men (47.4%). The age characteristics indicated that the most considerable proportion of respondents was in the age category of 31–40 years (48.6%), followed by the age category of 41–50 years (41.9%), and then the age category of 21–30 years (5.5%), 51–60 years (2.4%) and 61 years and over (1.6%). The respondents' characteristics also indicated that the most significant proportion of respondents had the highest qualification of a National Diploma (National Qualifications Framework [NQF] Level 5) (35.2%), followed by a degree (NQF Level 7) (32.4%), and then honours or postgraduate diploma (NQF Level 8) (17.4%) and master's degree (NQF Level 9) (7.9%). In terms of the job or occupational level, the respondents' characteristics indicated that half of them were employees who were

TABLE 1: Characteristics of respondents ($N = 254$).

Item	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	133	52.6
	Male	120	47.4
Age group (years)	21–30	14	5.5
	31–40	123	48.6
	41–50	106	41.9
	51–60	6	2.4
	61 and over	4	1.6
Highest qualification	Matric (NQF Level 5)	18	7.1
	National Diploma (NQF Level 5)	89	35.2
	Degree (NQF Level 7)	82	32.4
	Honours/postgraduate diploma (NQF Level 8)	44	17.4
	Master's (NQF Level 9)	20	7.9
Job category (occupation)	Employee 1 – Semi-skilled and discretionary decision-making	16	6.3
	Employee 2 – Unskilled and defined decision-making	127	50.2
	Employee 3 – Unskilled and no decision-making	40	15.8
	Manager/supervisor – Skilled technically and academically qualified workers, junior management, supervisors, foremen and superintendents	70	27.7

NQF, National Qualifications Framework.

unskilled but had a defined decision-making skill (50.2%), followed by managers and/or supervisors (27.7%), and then unskilled and no decision-making skill employees (15.8%), and semi-skilled and discretionary decision-making employees (6.3%).

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to determine the reliability of the TL scale and gave the following results: abusive supervision (0.89), authoritarian leadership (0.77), narcissism (0.61), self-promotion (0.78) and unpredictability (0.90). However, it should be noted that Items 19 and 22 adversely affected the reliability of the narcissism construct, and it was decided to omit them from the construct.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the OC scale were as follows: participation (0.95), respect for the individual (0.82), action orientation (0.80), trust (0.82), openness (0.88) and power distance (0.61). Therefore, the reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients (0.60–0.90) indicated the constructs' reliability. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for TI was 0.89. Thus, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients in this study were reliable for measuring TI in the CRO (see Table 2).

The first research objective was to measure employees' perceived levels of TL, TI and OC within the CRO. Regarding perceived TL behaviours, self-promotion had a mean of 2.21 and an SD of 0.92. A mean score of 2.21, closer to '2' on the Likert scale, indicated a slight agreement among respondents regarding the items within the self-perception behaviour in leadership. This implies that, on average, employees perceive moderate self-promotion as a TL dimension. Abusive supervision had a mean of 2.47 and an SD of 1.06. With a mean score of 2.47, this dimension's average response was between slightly agree and neutral. The higher SD indicated more variability in responses, suggesting differing experiences or perceptions of abusive supervision. Unpredictability had a mean of 2.46 and an SD of 1.05. Like abusive supervision, the average response for unpredictability was between slightly agree and neutral. The SD indicated a varied perception among respondents

TABLE 2: Reliability of the scales.

Scales/factor	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Toxic leadership dimensions		
Abusive supervision	7	0.89
Authoritarian leadership	6	0.77
Narcissism	5	0.61
Self-promotion	5	0.78
Unpredictability	7	0.90
Organisational culture dimensions		
Participation	4	0.95
Respect for the individual	3	0.82
Action orientation	3	0.80
Trust	3	0.82
Openness	2	0.88
Power distance	3	0.61
Turnover intention	6	0.89

regarding the role of unpredictability in TL. Narcissism had a mean of 1.53 and an SD of 0.57. The mean score of 1.53 reflected an average response between strongly agree and agree. The low SD pointed to a high level of agreement among respondents. Authoritarian leadership had a mean of 2.29 and an SD of 0.85. This dimension had a mean score of slight agreement. The SD indicated a moderate level of consensus.

Regarding the OC factors, participation had a mean of 3.15 and an SD of 1.35. Mixed feelings about participation within the OC were observed ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.35$). The high SD reflected significant variation in responses. Respect for individuals had a mean of 3.12 and an SD of 1.29. This scale/dimension scored around the neutral point, with a high SD suggesting diverse experiences or perceptions of respect for individuals within the organisation. The mean of 2.43 and an SD of 0.91 for action orientation indicated an agreement leaning towards neutral with a moderate SD. The trust had a mean of 2.82 and an SD of 1.04, leaning towards neutral as an average response, thus mixed opinions on trust within the OC. The SD indicated varying experiences among respondents. Openness had a mean of 3.25 and an SD of 1.43, reflecting a neutral average score and a high SD. The mean of 2.66 and an SD of 0.92 for power distance indicated a slight disagreement regarding the items within the power distance factor in OC, with a moderate level of consensus among respondents.

The TI had a mean of 3.75 and an SD of 0.75. The respondents gave a high mean score of 3.75, indicating that they frequently consider leaving the organisation. While not very high, the SD suggested variations in how often individuals thought about leaving the organisation.

In summary, the mean values suggest that employees, on average, tend to disagree with TL factors, agree with some positive OC factors, and agree to leave the organisation. However, individual perceptions vary, especially regarding OC factors.

TABLE 3: Employees' perceived toxic leadership, organisational culture and turnover intention levels.

Construct	Mean (<i>M</i>)	SD
Toxic leadership (TL) factors		
TL – Self-promotion	2.21	0.92
TL – Abusive supervision	2.47	1.06
TL – Unpredictability	2.46	1.05
TL – Narcissism	1.53	0.57
TL – Authoritarian leadership	2.29	0.85
Organisational culture (OC) factors		
OC – Participation	3.15	1.35
OC – Respect for individuals	3.12	1.29
OC – Action orientation	2.43	0.91
OC – Trust	2.82	1.04
OC – Openness	3.25	1.43
OC – Power distance	2.66	0.92
Turnover intention	3.75	0.75

SD, standard deviation.

The second research objective was to measure the relationship between TL, OC and TI. A Spearman's rho correlation analysis evaluated the relationships between TL, OC and TI among 253 participants. The study revealed a significant negative correlation between TL and OC ($r_s = -0.748, p < 0.01$) and a significant negative correlation between TL and TI ($r_s = -0.812, p < 0.01$). Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between OC and TI ($r_s = 0.710, p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that higher levels of TL are associated with lower OC and higher TI. In contrast, a positive OC is associated with lower TI. The correlation coefficients indicate large, practically significant effects, with values exceeding 0.5, underscoring the substantial influence of TL and OC on organisational outcomes.

Table 4 presents a correlation matrix showing the relationships between the primary constructs of TL, OC and TI.

The study's third research objective was to establish whether OC mediates the relationship between TL and TI. Structural equation modelling was used to establish the mediating role of OC between TL and TI. Regarding the mediator role of OC in the relationship between TL and TI, the TLI and CFI values you reported are significantly below the threshold of 0.95, generally considered indicative of a good fit. Similarly, the RMSEA value of 0.34 is much higher than the guideline value of around 0.05 for indicating a good fit. These statistics suggest that the model, in its current form, does not adequately capture the complexity of the relationships among TL, OC and TI. Despite the poor fit, the model explains a substantial 68.4% of the variance in TI. This high percentage indicates that the constructs included in the model, especially TL and OC, are relevant to understanding why employees may intend to leave the organisation. The most striking result is that OC mediates 83.19% of the effect of TL on TI. This suggests that how OC is shaped by, responds to or interacts with TL practices profoundly influences employees' intentions to leave. It implies that OC can buffer or exacerbate the adverse effects of TL on employee TI.

TABLE 4: Correlation matrix between the primary constructs.

Spearman's rho	Toxic leadership	Organisational culture	Turnover intention
Toxic leadership			
Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-0.748	-0.812
Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.000	0.000
N	253	253	253
Organisational culture			
Correlation Coefficient	-0.748	1.000	0.710
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.000	-	0.000
N	253	253	253
Turnover intention			
Correlation Coefficient	-0.812	0.710	1.000
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.000	0.000	-
N	253	253	253

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).
Sig., significance.

Discussion

The study's findings show that workers at the CRO felt that TL was present at moderate levels, particularly in self-promotion, abusive supervision and unpredictability. However, the perceived levels of narcissism and authoritarian leadership were relatively low. This implies that the organisation should focus on addressing the dimensions of TL employees feel are more common.

Regarding OC, the results indicate that employees had mixed feelings about participation, respect for individuals, action orientation, trust and power distance. The high SD in some of these dimensions suggests that employees may have different experiences and perceptions of these factors. Therefore, the organisation may need to pay more attention to these dimensions and ensure employees experience them positively.

The results also indicate that employees frequently consider leaving the organisation, which is a significant concern for the CRO. While the mean value of TI was not very high, the SD suggested variations in how often individuals thought about leaving the organisation. Therefore, the organisation needs to examine the factors contributing to this intention and take necessary measures to reduce it. The study provides insights into employees' perceptions of TL, OC and TI in the CRO. The organisation can use these results to identify areas that need improvement and take appropriate measures to address them.

The literature consistently reports the detrimental effects of TL across multiple contexts, including increased employee turnover, decreased job satisfaction and eroded organisational trust (Budak & Erdal, 2022; Lee et al., 2024; Octavian, 2023). The literature also highlights specific outcomes such as burnout, decreased morale and counterproductive work behaviours as consequences of TL (Fan et al., 2023; Klahn Acuña & Male, 2022). This study's results mirror these findings by demonstrating significant negative correlations between TL, OC and TI. Specifically, the study found that higher levels of TL are associated with poorer OC and higher TI. These results validate the literature's emphasis on the negative impact of TL on organisational outcomes.

Previous studies suggest that OC and job satisfaction can mediate the effects of TL (Fan et al., 2023; Ofei et al., 2023). This perspective points to the potential of OC components to mitigate or exacerbate the impacts of TL. The study extends this by showing that OC significantly mediates the relationship between TL and TI. This suggests that a positive OC can substantially buffer the adverse effects of TL on employees' TI.

Various studies have reported that high TIs are a frequent consequence of TL (Sabino et al., 2024; Türkmen Keskin &

Özduyan Kiliç, 2024). This is often linked directly to job satisfaction and organisational trust erosion. Consistent with the literature, the study identifies a strong negative correlation between TL and TI. The findings are supported by quantitative measures where TI had a high mean score, indicating frequent considerations of leaving by employees.

Managerial implications and recommendations

Toxic leadership behaviours significantly impact employees' intentions to leave a company. Therefore, management must identify and address these behaviours through leadership development programmes and targeted interventions. The study highlights the importance of promoting a positive OC to counteract the adverse effects of TL. This can be achieved by fostering employee participation, respect, trust and openness. Leaders must adopt positive leadership styles such as empathy, support and constructive feedback and avoid authoritarian and narcissistic tendencies. Regular assessments of leadership behaviours and OC should be conducted to identify areas for improvement and measure the effectiveness of interventions. Engaging employees in cultural transformation ensures that their needs and perspectives are considered, which enhances their sense of belonging and commitment to the organisation. These recommendations aim to mitigate the adverse effects of TL on TI by fostering a supportive and engaging OC.

Limitations of the study

The extent to which the findings can be generalised to other settings or populations may be limited if the study sample is not sufficiently diverse or is drawn from a specific organisational context. The cross-sectional research design could identify associations but not causality. Reliance on self-reported data could introduce bias, as participants might respond in socially desirable ways, or their perceptions may not accurately reflect reality. Studies conducted within a single organisation may limit the applicability of findings across different organisations or industries. The validity and reliability of the instruments used to measure TL, OC and TI could influence the findings. While validated instruments help mitigate this concern, the interpretation of such measures can vary by context.

Recommendations for future research

Future research studies could investigate the impact of TL, OC and TI in various industries and cultural settings. To determine whether the findings are universal or specific, longitudinal research designs should be used to capture changes over time. This will provide insights into the causal relationships between TL, OC and TI. Qualitative methodologies could help better understand employees' experiences and perceptions of TL and OC. Evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions is vital to mitigate TL and promote a positive OC. Additionally, individual

differences such as personality and resilience could influence the effects of TL on TI and examining the mediating role of OC can be beneficial. Lastly, comparing the influence of different dimensions of TL on organisational outcomes could help identify the most harmful behaviours. These recommendations could enhance understanding the complex interplay between leadership, culture and employee turnover and provide valuable insights for academic research and organisational practice.

Conclusion

The study concluded that TL significantly influenced employee TI within a CRO in South Africa, with OC playing a crucial mediating role. While employees perceive moderate levels of certain TL behaviours, these perceptions and mixed feelings towards OC dimensions contribute to TI. This research underscores the importance of addressing TL and fostering a positive OC to mitigate TI, offering valuable insights for enhancing employee retention and organisational health in similar contexts.

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Authors' contributions

P.A.B., as the supervisor, was responsible for writing the article. At the same time, S.D.J. was responsible for the literature review, data collection, analysis, interpretation and discussion of the results for an MBA study and was a registered student at the time.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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