


The challenge of toxic leadership in realising Sustainable Development Goals: A scoping review

**Author:**Linda Ronnie¹ **Affiliation:**

¹School of Management Studies, Faculty of Commerce, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Linda Ronnie,
linda.ronnie@uct.ac.za

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Orientation: Best human resource management (HRM) practices can play a crucial role in addressing unethical leadership in the form of toxic leadership by fostering organisational cultures where trust, integrity, and accountability are prioritised.

Research purpose: The paper addresses how the HRM function can contribute to eliminating toxic leadership and its associated norms and thereby meet the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 16.

Motivation for the study: The prevalence of toxic leadership and the extent of the detrimental consequences for employees and organisational functioning is a key challenge in realising SDGs 8 and 16.

Research approach/design and method: To conduct the scoping review, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were followed, and selected databases were searched for peer reviewed empirical articles between 2014 and 2024. Results were summarised and thematically categorised with regard to the objectives of the paper.

Main findings: Ethical leadership behaviours are presented as a key mechanism for offsetting the impact of toxic behaviours of organisational leaders. In order to achieve SDGs 8 and 16, the support and commitment from HRM practitioners are essential.

Practical/managerial implications: Promoting ethical leadership and a conducive work environment demands attention in the following five areas of HRM practice: recruitment and selection; training and development; performance management; employee engagement and wellbeing; and organisational culture.

Contribution/value-add: The review of existing literature on toxic leadership offers a succinct summary of different mechanisms and strategies that can be employed to counter these forms of leadership behaviours in organisations.

Keywords: toxic leadership; destructive leadership; toxic behaviours; ethical leadership; sustainable development goals; human resource management.

Introduction

The organisational challenges of our time, including mental health and employee well-being (World Health Organization, 2022), diversity, equality and inclusion (Shen et al., 2021), corporate governance (Guimaraes-Costa et al., 2021), the rise of technology and the pursuit of sustainability (Foo et al., 2021), demand a new kind of leadership. This leadership must be characterised by responsibility, empathy and foresight (Haski-Leventhal, 2022). The emergence of such leaders is particularly critical as their influence can significantly shape organisational outcomes. Building on these challenges facing modern organisations, the issue of ethical leadership emerges as a critical concern. In recent years, the term 'toxic leadership' has become an emerging construct in empirical discussions about unethical and immoral leadership within the fields of management, psychology and ethics (Boddy, 2021, 2023; Labrague, 2020; Lipman-Blumen, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2010; Mackey et al., 2021).

Toxic leaders are those who practice unethical and irresponsible behaviours. Within the discourse on the 'dark side of leadership' that began more than three decades ago (Conger, 1990), destructive

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leadership and toxic leadership represent complementary concepts and research areas that examine the malignant behaviours of leaders. Where destructive leadership accentuates individual-level actions through negative behaviours directed at followers or subordinates, toxic leadership focusses on organisation-level malfeasance and its impacts (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Hence, toxic leadership is associated with linking the behaviour of destructive leaders to its harmful effect on the organisation, people and environment (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b). Consequently, studies of toxic leadership look beyond the traits of the individual leader and consider the people and environment that interact with leaders to create and sustain toxicity (Padilla et al., 2007).

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 focusses on promoting 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' (United Nations, 2015). This objective includes the provision of safe and secure working environments. To make this a reality, organisations need to ensure that their leadership is ethically sound and creates conducive environments where all employees can flourish. This objective can be achieved through the principles and practices of ethical leadership. Organisations, through ethical practices, also play a crucial role in contributing to the achievement of SDG16, which focusses on promoting peace, justice and strong institutions. By promoting ethical leadership and fostering a culture of integrity, accountability and transparency, organisations can become strong and effective institutions that support the rule of law, combat corruption and uphold human rights (Sama & Shoaf, 2008).

In today's complex and dynamic business environment, ethical leadership and effective human resource management (HRM) practices are essential for building and sustaining successful organisations. Ethical leadership not only upholds moral principles and values but also fosters a culture of trust, integrity and accountability within an organisation (Brown & Treviño, 2006). As a complement to ethical leadership, best HRM practices play a crucial role in attracting, developing and retaining talent, while aligning organisational goals with ethical conduct and employee well-being (Landy & Conte, 2016), all contributors to the achievement of SDGs 8 and 16.

Research purpose

While the existing literature provides abundant information on toxic leadership, including definitions, characteristics and its impact on the workplace, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how HRM can utilise insights from ethical leadership to address this problem. This article addresses how the HRM function can contribute to eliminating toxic leadership and its associated behaviours. Despite the prevalence of research interest in toxic leadership, there is a scarcity of research exploring the role of HRM in addressing this problem through an ethical lens (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014)

or linking these organisational issues to SDGs. This conceptual article therefore offers a contribution to the existing body of knowledge by examining how to overcome toxic leadership challenges and achieve SDGs 8 and 16. The article also presents a set of HRM practices based on ethical leadership principles that can assist organisations to address the impact of toxic leadership behaviours.

Methodology

To explore the aspects of toxic leadership and ethical leadership, a scoping review was conducted during April 2024 using EBSCOhost, JSTOR, SCOPUS, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases to locate relevant peer-reviewed literature on the topic from the period 2014 to 2024 using the terms 'toxic leadership', 'toxic behaviours', 'ethical leadership' and 'ethical behaviours'. A scoping review, while similar to a systematic review, provides a 'snapshot' of a specific area (Munn et al., 2018). It aims to explore the extent, nature and range of research on a topic – in this case, toxic and ethical leadership within the context of the SDGs – offering an overview of the evidence (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The recommended Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were followed (Page et al., 2021). An iterative search process was used that allowed for the continual refinement of terms and in so doing increased the relevance of the articles included in the sample. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the procedure used. The initial process yielded 164 sources using the terms 'toxic leadership' and 'ethical leadership'. The abstracts of these articles were reviewed alongside an evaluation of the relevance of the research objectives, methodological approach and theoretical soundness. After excluding irrelevant literature, 35 articles remained; an additional 11 were identified from references and citations of selected articles, totalling 46. Further sources related to the relevant SDGs were also included. To develop the recommendations section, an additional scoping review following the same process was undertaken. The term 'human resource management' and 'HRM' were added to the initial terms. This yielded zero sources. The terms 'toxic leadership' and 'toxic behaviours' were removed and a total of two sources were then found. Through using only the terms 'ethical behaviours' and 'HRM', 67 sources were identified. After eliminating unrelated literature, 12 articles remained. Peer-reviewed articles related to HRM in the various areas of suggested improvements were then sourced through a further search process and were also included. This process yielded 28 articles in total.

The article proceeds as follows: Firstly, the topic of toxic leadership is examined and the environmental factors that give rise to its existence and the effect of such leadership on the organisation are discussed. Secondly, the concept of ethical leadership is described and an argument for how it can help to curb the growth of toxic leadership and contribute towards the realisation of SDG 8 and SDG 16 is presented. The article concludes by offering five recommended practices for HRM practitioners to adopt, along with a discussion on limitations and four propositions for future research.

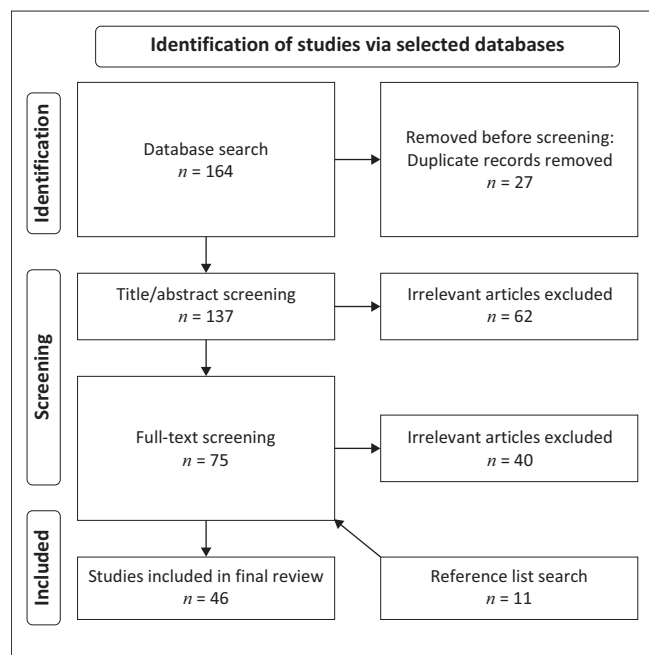


FIGURE 1: Scoping review process.

Defining toxic leadership and behaviours

A useful definition of toxic leadership must firstly be contextualised within an understanding of destructive leadership and its related concepts. Although ‘toxic’ and ‘destructive’ are frequently used interchangeably to describe ineffective or harmful leaders, researchers define the relationship between the concepts differently. Toxic leadership is often envisaged as a sub-category of destructive leadership (Mackey et al., 2021; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Thoroughgood et al. (2012) map a subset of these categories – ‘dark’ charismatic leadership, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, supervisor undermining, management-by-exception, laissez-faire and personalised leadership – according to their intentionality. Notably, the authors observe that each of these concepts captures specific manifestations of follower-directed behaviour, with impacts at the individual-level.

Thoroughgood et al. (2018) produced a framework that expands the definition of destructive leadership to include three behavioural dimensions: subordinate-directed behaviours, organisation-directed behaviours and sexual harassment behaviours. This shift in the characterisation of the concept is a critical development in the study of ‘bad’ leadership as it draws attention away from the individual traits and behaviours of leaders, to include the followers and organisation, and the interactions between them. Within this wider empirical context, the concept of toxic leadership serves to link the traits and behaviours of individual leaders with their surroundings. This is most succinctly captured in Padilla et al.’s (2007) ‘toxic triangle’, which identifies destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments as the three components of toxicity.

Contrary to common belief, toxic leaders need not exhibit destructive behaviours in all situations, nor use the same

TABLE 1: Toxic leader behaviours.

Organisation-directed behaviours	Follower-directed behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> engaging in corrupt, criminal, and/or other unethical activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deliberate undermining, demeaning, marginalising, intimidating, demoralising, disenfranchising or incapacitating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> subverting those structures and processes of the system intended to generate truth, justice and excellence, and engaging in criminal acts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> stifling constructive criticism and teaching supporters (sometimes by threats and authoritarianism) to comply with, rather than to question, the leader’s judgement and actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> failing to recognise or ignoring and/or promoting incompetence, cronyism, and corruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> misleading through deliberate untruths and misdiagnoses of issues and problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> behaving incompetently by misdiagnosing problems and failing to implement solutions to recognised problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> maliciously setting constituents against one another

Source: From Lipman-Blumen, J. (2010). Toxic leadership: A conceptual framework. In: F. Bournois, Duval-J. Hamel, S. Roussillon, & J.L. Scaringella (Eds.), *Handbook of top management teams* (pp. 214–220). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230305335_23

destructive behaviours all the time. To this end, Lipman-Blumen (2010) identifies an extensive list of behaviours that toxic leaders can exhibit (see Table 1).

Subsequent studies have attempted to enumerate the qualities of toxic leaders using different paradigms. For instance, Kets de Vries (2014) identified four pathologies and personality disorders that commonly afflict toxic leaders (narcissism, manic-depression, passive-aggressiveness and emotional disconnection), while Green (2014) found that employees with toxic leaders identified four patterns of behaviour in their leaders (egotism, ethical failure, incompetence and neuroticism). Green (2014) further observes that these patterns are interrelated and not taxonomic, highlighting the difficulty in pinpointing toxic behaviour. Schmidt’s (2008) toxic leadership scale (TLS) attempts to create an index of toxic leadership by resolving behaviours and traits into five elements: self-promotion, abusive leadership, unpredictability, narcissism and authoritarian leadership. Followers play an important role in how toxicity manifests and how toxic leaders make their way through the organisation. Consequently, multiple studies have examined the followers of toxic leaders and their responses and coping mechanisms (Bhandarker & Rai, 2018; Webster et al., 2016). To expand the understanding of followers, and to move away from the leader-centrism of the discourse, Lipman-Blumen’s (2005b, 2007) research investigations have primarily focussed on the susceptibility of followers and why they respond to toxic leaders as they do.

The impact of toxic leadership

Given that individuals can perceive toxic leadership behaviour differently, and that toxic leaders can have varying levels of intentionality and behaviour in diverse settings, the presence of toxic leadership within the organisation or group is distinguished by its actual impact, that is the creation of toxicity. As Reed (2004) explains, it is not a single behaviour that makes a leader toxic, but the cumulative effect of that behaviour on others. Toxic leadership impacts the organisation in three ways: organisational culture, employee experience and organisational and individual performance (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2019). Studies of the impacts of toxic leaders have been particularly prominent in the military,

education and medical fields. For instance, Reed (2004) was one of the first to discuss the role of toxic leaders in the military and raised the concern that it could damage unit effectiveness over the long-term (in addition to damaging team morale).

Baloyi's (2020) review of toxic leadership in academia discusses how values within departments and institutions become degraded as a result of the stress placed on employees and the subsequent impact on their performance. Kayani and Alasan (2021) conducted a study on nurses and their experiences with toxic leaders. The findings revealed that toxic leadership behaviour has a detrimental impact on the psychological contract, resulting in increased instances of counterproductive work behaviour, such as hostility or harassment. Consequently, the organisation's ability to function properly is compromised. Psychological contract theory suggests that the mechanism of worker dysfunction is posited to be increased stress for workers. However, there is also a pattern of employees exhibiting counterproductive work behaviour in retaliation to the harm inflicted by toxic leaders (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). For example, in Labrague's (2020) study conducted in a hospital setting, nurses with toxic leaders reported more incidents of poor quality of care for patients.

Multiple studies highlight the psychological toll of toxic leadership on workers. In a study of employees and supervisors from multiple small information technology firms, Khan (2021) found that toxic leadership significantly impacted the psychological safety of workers, which reduces proactive work behaviour. Bhandarker and Rai's (2018) study of employees in both public and private organisations found that exposure to toxic leaders led to increased psychological distress (i.e. loss of self-worth, withdrawal and agitation). Relatedly, several studies have shown that toxic leadership reduces worker job satisfaction (Labrague et al., 2020; Uysal, 2019). As noticed earlier, other studies have documented adverse impacts on worker's physical and psychological well-being.

Lipman-Blumen (2007) places strong emphasis on the role of followers in enabling toxic leaders. She posits that there are three 'webs' that make followers susceptible to toxic leadership: individual internal needs (psychological and existential), external social context (culture and norms) and psychosocial factors (self-esteem and achievement). The second web intersects largely with the 'conduce environments' component of Padilla et al.'s (2007) toxic triangle. However, the first and third web echo other findings about employees' fear and lack of confidence, but also a desire to succeed and find meaning. Webster et al.'s (2016) mixed method study of followers with toxic leaders provides the richest investigation of the impacts on workers, identifying multiple examples of damages to psychological well-being (self-doubt, high stress, anxiety, depression), emotional well-being (mistrust, anger, fear) and physical well-being (health problems). In many cases, followers are

not fending off toxicity. Gino (2018) explains that fear of retaliation, the assumption that others will act, and conformity to social norms are common reasons for follower inaction. Yet, toxic leaders can appear as heroes who give meaning and certainty. Consequently, some followers are attracted by the charisma and power of toxic leaders (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2014). This is particularly the case in uncertain and chaotic environments where toxic leaders appear to promise predictability and control.

Addressing toxic behaviours through ethical leadership to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 16

Ethical leadership has been described as leading by example through ethical behaviour in one's personal actions and relationships, while actively encouraging and reinforcing such positive conduct among followers through open communication, consistent reinforcement and principled decision-making (Brown & Treviño, 2005). Ethical leaders are viewed as innately moral people, as opposed to toxic leaders who exploit others to achieve their own objectives (Cullen, 2022). Ethical leaders demonstrate accountability by taking responsibility for their actions, admit mistakes and implement corrective measures when necessary. They establish clear lines of authority, transparent reporting mechanisms and robust systems of checks and balances, ensuring that power is exercised responsibly and that stakeholders can hold leaders accountable (Grover et al., 2019).

A key aspect of SDG 8 is promoting decent work, which encompasses safe working conditions, fair wages, reasonable hours and opportunities for career development (United Nations, 2015). Achieving this objective requires organisations to foster positive and ethical employee-employer relationships that uphold the principles of decent work, equal opportunity, and a supportive work environment. Similar to SDG 8, SDG 16 has as its objective the promotion of effective accountable and inclusive organisations where fairness and transparency are paramount (United Nations, 2015). Toxic leadership practices, characterised by abusive behaviour and disregard for employee well-being, directly undermine the principles embedded in both the SDGs (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a). When leaders exhibit toxic behaviours, they can create unhealthy and oppressive work environments that negatively affect employee motivation, job satisfaction and productivity (Tepper et al., 2017), cause psychological contract breach (Kayani & Alasan, 2021) and high turnover (Brouwers & Paltu, 2020).

In contrast, ethical leadership practices that prioritise respect, empowerment, fairness and concern for employee development align with the spirit of SDG 8 and SDG 16 (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders who demonstrate integrity, transparency and accountability in their actions engender an organisational culture that prioritises fairness and equal opportunities. By actively engaging with employees, soliciting their input and providing mentorship and professional growth opportunities, ethical leaders create

a supportive environment that allows and enables employees to enjoy a sense of psychological safety, to thrive and to reach their full potential (Treviño et al., 2003). As Baloyi (2020) observes, where trust exists and relationships are constructed in an authentic, ethical manner, organisations have more opportunity for holistic development.

As opposed to toxic leadership behaviours characterised by authoritarianism, bullying and a disregard for employee well-being, ethical leaders recognise the importance of employee well-being and promote work-life balance and provide access to mental wellness resources, thereby meeting the broader SDG objective of creating a supportive working environment. Ethical leadership practices are also seen in the promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion within their organisations. By embracing and leveraging the richness of diversity, ethical leaders strive to create a culture that nurtures innovation, creativity and a shared commitment to sustainable development, aligning with the goals of SDG 16 (Sharma & Good, 2013).

Aligning human resource management with achieving Sustainable Development Goals: Practical implications

Progressive people management practices with ethical principles can encourage and grow talented, engaged and ethical employees, thereby driving positive change and organisational sustainability, and creating a road map to meeting the objectives of SDGs 8 and 16. However, given the reality that many organisations face financial and other resource constraints, there is a possibility that implementing progressive HRM practices may be hindered (Shah & Arjoon, 2023). There is therefore justification for a prioritised and phased approach. What follows is a discussion of five interrelated areas that can be targeted for improvement to counter unethical and toxic leadership behaviours in organisations.

Recruitment and selection

Human resource management emphasises the importance of attracting and selecting individuals who align with the organisation's values and ethical principles. This process involves developing comprehensive selection criteria that assess not only technical competencies but also ethical decision-making skills, integrity and a commitment to sustainable practices. Any recruitment process must be thoroughly conducted and the use of psychometric tests to assess candidates at the senior level should be mandatory. In this instance, specific psychometric tests that highlight toxic behaviours could be included in the battery of psychometric tests. Utilising effective procedures in the process of selection to identify and exclude applicants with non-transformational traits and unethical behaviours is essential (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün & Gumusluoglu, 2013). The focus of the organisation should be on employing ethical staff and particularly leaders who serve as role models, inspiring and empowering their employees to uphold high ethical standards and contribute

to sustainable development efforts. Organisations should prioritise transparency, accountability and stakeholder engagement to ensure that ethical considerations are integrated into all aspects of decision-making and operations (Toor & Ofori, 2009). Organisations can effectively decrease the hiring of toxic individuals in managerial positions and foster a workforce that is more resistant to and capable of managing toxic leadership behaviours by hiring individuals who align with their core values.

Training and development

Skills programmes that enhance ethical decision-making, conflict resolution techniques and an understanding of sustainable development principles are also required (Ardichvili, 2013). These programmes equip employees at all levels with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate ethical dilemmas, promote inclusivity and contribute to the organisation's ability to achieve the objectives of SDGs 8 and 16. Findings on toxic leadership indicate an emphasis on ethical behaviour and judgement in management training and development is crucial (Treviño et al., 2003). Through case studies, simulations and real-world examples, management education can convey the consequences of toxic leadership and the strategies for building a healthy and inclusive organisational culture (Ronnie, 2017). This knowledge can empower future leaders to implement best practices for fostering a positive work environment, such as promoting transparency, encouraging feedback and recognising and rewarding positive behaviours.

Encouraging a toxic or destructive leader to adopt a different style can be challenging, but it is possible with a comprehensive approach focussed on self-awareness, emotional intelligence and organisational culture change. At the individual-level, coaching and feedback interventions can help increase toxic leaders' self-awareness and motivation to change, although some toxic leaders may be impossible to change (Kets de Vries, 2014). Developing emotional intelligence skills such as self-regulation, empathy and social awareness is crucial. Leaders must understand the negative impact of their behaviours and develop healthier coping mechanisms through honest reflection. For successful transformation, toxic leaders must demonstrate genuine commitment and willingness to change, supported by organisational efforts to foster a positive and ethical culture. Without addressing both individual and organisational factors, attempts by HRM practitioners to reform toxic leaders and instil ethical behaviours are likely to fall short.

Employee engagement and well-being

Potential ethical concerns or unethical behaviours must be identified and addressed through encouraging open communication, employee engagement and feedback loops. Human resource management practitioners can facilitate these kinds of feedback channels by conducting regular surveys – which will produce comparable data analytics to

highlight trends, town hall-style meetings and open-door policies that encourage employees to voice their concerns and suggestions. The promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives also encourage a culture of open dialogue and respect (Shen et al., 2021). By implementing policies and practices that embrace diversity, provide equal opportunities and eliminate discrimination, organisations can create an inclusive workplace that aligns with the principles of SDGs 8 and 16. Recognising the importance of employee well-being and engagement, HRM practitioners can promote initiatives that foster a positive and supportive work environment while confronting the negative impacts of toxic leadership. This includes implementing policies that encourage work-life balance, provide wraparound mental health support services and create open communication channels (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). By prioritising employee well-being and encouraging ethical behaviours, organisations can create a workforce that is motivated, resilient and better equipped to contribute to SDGs.

Performance management

Well-designed performance management and compensation systems lead to increased productivity and innovation (Aguinis, 2013) and enhanced accountability and transparency (Schleicher & Baumann, 2020) when they align with goals for ethical and sustainable development. By establishing clear performance metrics and measuring progress that considers not only financial objectives but also ethical conduct, environmental stewardship and social responsibility, HRM practitioners can incentivise and reward behaviours that support SDGs 8 and 16. This approach reinforces the importance of ethical leadership, decent work conditions and sustainable practices while discouraging toxic leadership behaviours. One approach is to include ethical leadership competencies in the performance evaluation criteria for leaders. These competencies should reflect the organisation's values and expectations around ethical decision-making, integrity and respect for employees and stakeholders. Regular feedback and coaching sessions can also be used to reinforce ethical leadership practices and address any concerning behaviours (Nguyen et al., 2017). By providing ongoing guidance and support, HRM practitioners can help leaders develop self-awareness and continuously improve their ethical leadership skills.

In addition, organisations can implement robust systems for reporting and investigating ethical violations, with clear disciplinary actions for substantiated cases of unethical or toxic leadership (Pelletier, 2010). This not only holds leaders accountable but also sends a strong message about the organisation's commitment to ethical conduct. Performance incentives, such as bonuses or promotions, can be tied to ethical leadership metrics, further reinforcing the importance of ethical behaviour. Conversely, ethical lapses or toxic leadership behaviours should result in consequences, such as demotion, suspension or termination, depending on the severity of the violation. By integrating ethical principles into

performance management systems and consistently holding leaders accountable, organisations can create environments that promote ethical leadership and discourage toxic behaviours, ultimately fostering a healthier and more sustainable workplace culture.

Organisational culture

Aubrey (2012) identifies three mechanisms by which an organisation's culture enables toxicity. The first of these is through accommodating the toxic leader by restructuring their role, position or work within the organisation. The second mechanism is by overlooking toxic behaviour when the individual is a high performer. The final way in which organisations allow toxic behaviours to flourish is through poor internal governance and detection processes that make it difficult for organisations to identify and address toxic behaviour. Toxic leaders thrive in organisations that value high performance but lack the oversight mechanisms and processes to monitor performance (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2019). Creating a culture of accountability, transparency and ethical decision-making can help mitigate the enabling environments that allow toxic leadership to thrive and, in turn, achieve the objectives of SDGs 8 and 16. Strong, inclusive organisational environments and effective organisational systems have the potential to weaken toxic leadership behaviours, while an ethical culture can improve behaviours, attitudes and relationships, and boost overall performance outcomes (Elçi & Alpan, 2009). Recent research has found that within an ethical culture, employees perform organisationally beneficial tasks that may even be outside their work scope (Strydom, 2021).

Organisational governance and detection processes need to be addressed to identify and deal with toxic behaviours and also to heighten awareness around and compliance with the intentions of the relevant SDGs. Establishing robust whistleblowing and grievance mechanisms can encourage employees to report unethical or toxic leadership practices without fear of retaliation (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b). These mechanisms should be transparent and protect the confidentiality of whistleblowers. As a more practical measure, HRM practitioners can draw on data analytics by measuring organisational culture at regular intervals to ensure that the culture aligns with espoused behaviours implicit in organisational objectives. While this process does not by itself lead to positive change (Winn & Dykes, 2019), it begins a process of organisational self-reflection. Although changing ingrained mindsets and behaviours can be a complex and long-term process, this step is particularly important to identify barriers and develop targeted interventions to engender a culture of ethical leadership and sustainability.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the recommendations that address unethical behaviours. To combat toxic leadership behaviours may not be as simple as merely embracing ethical leadership practices. While the concept of ethical leadership

and its possible contribution to achieving the SDGs is commendable, several crucial aspects deserve further discussion. Within different cultural settings, varying perspectives on what might constitute ethical leadership may be present. This raises a concern regarding the applicability of these frameworks across diverse organisational contexts. As highlighted earlier in this article, toxic behaviours are also enabled by the organisational context (Padilla et al., 2007). Ethical leaders may have significant challenges to face within their companies when attempting to promote inclusivity, employee empowerment, engagement, and the like (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Therefore, the ability of these leaders to effect meaningful change can be constrained, limiting their ability to achieve SDGs 8 and 16.

Organisational change, particularly in areas such as ethical leadership and sustainable practices, can face resistance from employees and leaders who are accustomed to traditional ways of working. Overcoming this resistance and fostering a culture of continuous improvement can be a significant challenge. Recent research also points to the difficulties that may be experienced by human resources (HR) staff themselves. These challenges include being co-opted to undermine legitimate HRM practices and colluding with toxic leaders (Page & Mgwenya, 2023). The authors observe that the actions of HR staff are likely not to be deliberate. This conduct stems from balancing inherently competing role demands such as meeting business objectives versus ensuring employee well-being. These HRM reactions align with Lipman-Blumen's (2007) conclusions on the role of followers in enabling toxic leadership behaviours, and shows an overlap with fight, flight or freeze coping mechanisms highlighted in other studies (Webster et al., 2016). A practical method to monitor adherence to good governance is a risk register detailing any deviation from accepted HRM practices that needs to be maintained and regularly reviewed (Page & Mgwenya, 2023). In the first instance, however, it is crucial for HRM practitioners to reflect on their own behaviours, note how these may contribute to negative work environments and recommit to their crucial role in instilling an ethic of care within the organisation.

Future research avenues

There are a number of implications for further research. Future empirical work in organisational studies could assess how the various HRM recommendations suggested in this article make headway in overcoming these challenges, thus adding to the body of knowledge around their efficacy. This may ensure a more nuanced understanding of how organisations are progressing with regard to addressing toxic leadership, promoting ethical behaviour and meeting SDG objectives. In general, there is a paucity of empirical work looking at the realities of meeting SDGs in organisations. Studies that focus on different aspects of achieving the SDGs, for example, through awareness, application and outcomes, are all worthy of further exploration. Research investigating what constitutes ethical leadership would also assist in appreciating the

contextual realities within which organisations operate. In-depth research to assess the impact of ethical leadership on toxic workplace behaviours is also required. Importantly, both quantitative and qualitative perspectives should be sought from employees in terms of their experiences in dealing with workplace challenges in this regard.

Conclusion

Ethical leadership is undoubtedly a critical component in fostering fair, robust and productive employer–employee relationships, and it is essential to recognise the organisational effort and commitment required. Achieving the ambitious objectives of SDGs 8 and 16 requires a concerted effort from organisations. Given the presence of toxic behaviours in our workplaces today, best HRM practices can start by assisting organisations to nurture ethical processes while mitigating the risks associated with toxic leadership behaviours. Effective implementation of these practices, coupled with the use of data analytics to gauge their effectiveness, requires strong commitment, accountability and visible support from senior leaders to ensure they gain the necessary traction. By proactively addressing these challenges, organisations can better position themselves to promote inclusive and empowered environments and contribute to the realisation of these crucial SDGs.

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