

The Psychological Impact of Toxic Work Culture in the Public Sector: A Study on Government Employees

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Abstract

This study investigates the psychological impact of toxic work culture in the public sector, with a specific focus on government employees. Toxic work culture in public sector organizations is often characterized by poor communication, lack of support from supervisors, and a sense of helplessness among employees. These conditions contribute to increased stress, burnout, and decreased motivation, which negatively affect employee performance and mental well-being. Data were collected through a survey of government employees across various departments and analyzed to identify key factors contributing to experiences of toxic work culture. The findings indicate that factors such as lack of organizational support and ineffective leadership exacerbate psychological stress and job dissatisfaction. Additionally, toxic work culture is found to potentially increase absenteeism and turnover intention among employees. The study also suggests transformational leadership approaches as a means to mitigate the negative effects of toxic culture in public sector organizations, emphasizing the importance of psychological support and positive work relationships to improve employee well-being. The findings aim to assist policymakers and public sector management in creating a healthier work environment that supports employee performance.

Keywords: Toxic Work Culture, Public Sector, Government Employees, Psychological Impact, Transformational Leadership, Organizational Support, Job Stress, Mental Well-Being, Job Performance, Job Dissatisfaction

Introduction

The public sector serves as the backbone of societal governance, delivering essential services such as healthcare, education, law enforcement, and public infrastructure. Its effectiveness directly impacts national stability and societal well-being, making the performance and mental health of public sector employees a matter of critical importance. However, the rise of toxic work culture within public sector organizations has emerged as a significant challenge, posing serious risks to employee well-being, organizational efficiency, and public trust.

Toxic work culture refers to a work environment characterized by excessive pressure, ineffective communication, and a lack of support from supervisors. These conditions often lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, and decreased motivation among employees (Caillier, 2014; Taylor & Westover, 2011). The consequences extend beyond individual employees, resulting in diminished job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, higher turnover intentions, and compromised service delivery. For public sector organizations, which rely heavily on a stable and committed workforce to ensure the smooth delivery of services, such disruptions can have far-reaching implications for society as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified the challenges faced by public sector employees. The unprecedented pressure and uncertainty during the crisis have intensified workplace stress, highlighting the urgent need for supportive environments and effective leadership. Studies (Lee & Shin, 2023) emphasize that fostering a positive and psychologically supportive work environment is crucial for mitigating the adverse effects of toxic culture and ensuring employee well-being.

Given these concerns, this study seeks to explore the psychological impact of toxic work culture on government employees. It aims to identify the key factors contributing to its prevalence and propose actionable strategies, such as transformational leadership and organizational support, to create healthier and more productive workplaces. Addressing this issue is not merely about improving employee satisfaction but is essential for ensuring the public sector's resilience, stability, and continued ability to meet society's needs effectively.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its multidimensional impact:

- **For Employees**

Government employees, who often work under high-pressure conditions, are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of toxic work culture. Understanding its psychological toll enables the development of tailored interventions to improve their mental health, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life.

- **For Public Sector Organizations**

Public sector entities rely on a stable, motivated workforce to deliver services effectively. This research highlights how toxic work environments hinder organizational goals by increasing absenteeism, turnover, and inefficiency, thereby underscoring the urgent need for reform.

- **For Policymakers and Leaders**

The findings provide actionable insights for policymakers and leaders on how to foster a healthier work environment through effective organizational support, transformational leadership, and stress management initiatives. Implementing these changes can improve employee retention and service delivery, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

- **For Broader Society**

As the public sector directly impacts societal well-being, addressing the challenges of toxic work culture contributes to the efficient delivery of critical services. A healthier workforce translates into more responsive, reliable, and high-quality public services, which benefits all citizens.

Emphasis on Utility

This study is particularly beneficial in the following contexts:

- **Human Resource Management:** Offers strategies to design better workplace policies and support systems.
- **Leadership Development:** Highlights the importance of transformational leadership in mitigating workplace toxicity.
- **Mental Health Advocacy:** Informs the creation of mental health programs tailored to public sector needs.
- **Crisis Management:** Provides guidance on building resilient work environments during crises like pandemics or economic downturns.

Literature Review

Toxic work culture refers to an environment that fosters stress, emotional instability, and job dissatisfaction among employees. In the public sector, toxic work culture has become a significant issue as it affects not only employee well-being but also the efficiency of public services. According to McHugh and Brennan (1994), an unsupportive work environment can increase work-related stress and lead to negative changes in public sector employees' mental health. Their study found that when workers face poor communication and lack of support, they are more likely to experience stress and burnout, which in turn negatively impacts their job satisfaction and productivity.

Organizational support and effective leadership are important factors that can reduce the negative effects of toxic work culture. Caillier (2014) found that transformational leadership, which focuses on the organization's mission and goals, can improve employee motivation and satisfaction, thus reducing turnover intention. He noted that transformational leaders are able to build more positive relationships with employees, increase engagement, and encourage behaviors beyond formal roles. This finding is supported by Lee and Shin (2023), who found that toxic work culture in government organizations can be minimized with committed leadership that provides emotional and organizational support to employees. Such leadership can play a significant role in addressing the stress faced by public sector employees, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the critical need for psychological support in the workplace.

Additionally, Kim (2018) showed that emotional dissonance is a key psychological factor that reduces job satisfaction among public sector employees working in toxic environments. When workers are forced to suppress their true emotions and align them with organizational expectations, it can lead to dissatisfaction and increase turnover intention. This study also emphasized that the absence of organizational support exacerbates emotional dissonance, leading to emotional exhaustion that can have long-term effects on employee mental well-being (Kim, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic also added further pressure on public sector employees, highlighting the urgent need for robust organizational support and resilient leadership. Lee and Shin (2023) emphasized that the pandemic revealed weaknesses in support structures for public sector employees, resulting in increased psychological stress and concerns about employees' mental health. Therefore, improvements in organizational policies and leadership approaches

are necessary to create a more positive work environment and reduce the effects of toxic culture in the public sector.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach using a survey method to collect data on government employees' perceptions of toxic work culture, organizational support, and the psychological effects they experience. The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for the collection of large-scale data, suitable for measuring levels of stress, job satisfaction, and turnover intention among public sector employees (Creswell, 2014).

The survey was developed based on validated measurement scales from previous studies. For instance, the Job Stress Scale and Emotional Exhaustion Scale were used to assess levels of stress and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The Perceived Organizational Support Scale was used to measure employees' perceptions of organizational and supervisory support (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

The study population consisted of government employees from various public sector departments, with simple random sampling used to ensure that every individual in the population had an equal chance of being selected (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). This aimed to create a sample that represents different departments and job levels in the public sector. The data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to perform descriptive analysis and regression analysis, which aimed to identify the relationships between toxic work culture, organizational support, and psychological effects on employees.

Additionally, correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between toxic work culture and psychological outcomes such as stress and job satisfaction. This approach provides deeper insights into how factors within toxic work culture are closely related to the psychological well-being of public sector employees (Pallant, 2020).

Discussion

The results of this study show that toxic work culture in the public sector has a significant impact on the psychological well-being of employees. As noted by Lee and Shin (2023), an unsupportive work environment, characterized by poor communication and lack of support from supervisors, increases the risk of psychological stress and emotional exhaustion among public sector workers. These findings are consistent with McHugh and Brennan (1994), who also found that a lack of support in the public sector work environment leads to low job satisfaction and increased turnover intention. The study also highlights the importance of organizational support, as perceived support can enhance employee motivation and commitment to the organization, as stated by (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

The study also shows that transformational leadership can help mitigate the negative effects of toxic work culture. Caillier (2014) found that transformational leaders, who emphasize the organization's mission and provide emotional support to employees, can improve job satisfaction and reduce psychological stress. This suggests that leaders who are empathetic and actively engaged in supporting their employees can strengthen the relationship between workers and the organization, thus reducing the impact of toxic culture.

Implications

This study has several important implications for public sector management and organizational policy. First, the findings suggest that public sector organizations should implement continuous psychological support programs to reduce stress among employees, particularly in environments at high risk for toxic work culture (Kim, 2018). By providing stress management training and creating more open communication channels, organizations can foster a more supportive and inclusive work environment (McHugh & Brennan, 1994).

Transformational leadership should also be promoted in the public sector. According to Caillier (2014), leaders who can inspire and support employee well-being can improve employee performance while reducing absenteeism and turnover intention. Leadership training programs that emphasize empathetic approaches and mission support can help leaders better manage the psychological challenges faced by employees. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for flexible and responsive policies to address mental health challenges in the workplace (Lee & Shin, 2023).

Conclusion

This study highlights the negative effects of toxic work culture on the psychological well-being of government employees, including stress, emotional exhaustion, and job dissatisfaction. The findings emphasize the need for the public sector to adopt strong organizational support and transformational leadership as ways to reduce toxic work culture. The implications of this study call for policymakers to consider improvements in management practices and employee well-being policies in the public sector, especially in high-pressure situations.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of how toxic work culture affects public sector employees and underscores the importance of more supportive management practices to build a healthier work environment. Future research could focus on specific intervention strategies to address the psychological impacts of toxic work culture and further explore the role of leaders in promoting employee well-being in the public sector.

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