

# The Delegitimization Cycle: How Toxic Leadership Erodes Employee Mental Health in Indonesian Workplaces

Original Article

**Burhanuddin<sup>1\*</sup>**

<sup>1\*</sup>Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia  
Email: <sup>1\*)</sup>[dr.burhanuddin@unm.ac.id](mailto:dr.burhanuddin@unm.ac.id)

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## Abstract

Toxic leadership has become a serious organizational issue in Indonesia, particularly within high power-distance workplace cultures that normalize abusive authority and discourage employee voice. Despite growing research on destructive leadership, studies exploring employees' lived psychological experiences remain limited. This study investigates how toxic leadership contributes to emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, organizational silence, and fear among employees in Indonesian private-sector organizations. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine informants and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal four major themes: delegitimization of employee agency, emotional exhaustion, organizational silence shaped by fear and hierarchy, and coping strategies ranging from adaptation to withdrawal and turnover intention. The study concludes that toxic leadership is reinforced by paternalistic and hierarchical organizational cultures, highlighting the need for stronger psychological safety, leadership accountability, and supportive workplace policies.

**Keywords:** Toxic Leadership, Emotional Exhaustion, Organizational Silence, Power Distance, Psychological Distress.

## 1. Introduction

Leadership constitutes one of the most consequential variables shaping organizational outcomes, and its influence extends well beyond operational efficiency into the psychological and physiological well-being of the workforce. While extensive scholarship has celebrated transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles for their capacity to enhance employee flourishing, a comparatively underexplored body of literature addresses the opposite phenomenon: leadership that is systematically destructive to the individuals it ostensibly serves (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Reed, 2004). This study engages with the latter phenomenon, conceptualized as toxic leadership, and investigates its consequences within the specific sociocultural context of Indonesian workplaces.

The Indonesian labor environment provides a particularly instructive context for this inquiry. Indonesia consistently registers among the highest-scoring nations on Hofstede's (1984) power distance index, signaling a cultural milieu in which hierarchical authority is not merely accepted but normatively expected (Hofstede, 1984; Luthans & Doh, 2009). Simultaneously, paternalistic leadership, a style in which the leader assumes an authoritative yet ostensibly benevolent parental role, remains culturally legitimate and organizationally prevalent (Cheng et al., 2004; Hamid et al., 2019). These conditions render employees structurally predisposed to defer to authority, to withhold critical voice, and to interpret even abusive managerial conduct through a lens of cultural normalcy. The intersection of toxic



leadership with these cultural dynamics creates what this study terms the 'delegitimization cycle,' a self-perpetuating process through which employee agency, well-being, and voice are progressively eroded.

The academic literature has accumulated compelling empirical evidence linking toxic leadership to adverse employee outcomes, including burnout, depression, anxiety, and turnover intention (Mathieu et al., 2014; Schmidt, 2014; Zhu et al., 2022). However, the bulk of this literature derives from Western organizational contexts, and cross-cultural transferability cannot be assumed. Studies specifically examining toxic leadership in Indonesia remain sparse, and qualitative investigations that preserve the experiential richness and cultural nuance necessary for an adequate understanding of lived psychological harm are rarer still. This study addresses that gap.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do employees in Indonesian workplaces experience and navigate the psychological consequences of sustained exposure to toxic leadership? Three subsidiary questions structure the thematic analysis: (a) What specific toxic leader behaviors and personal qualities do employees report as most harmful to their psychological well-being? (b) How do Indonesian cultural dimensions, specifically power distance and paternalism, mediate, amplify, or otherwise shape these experiences? (c) What adaptive strategies do employees deploy to protect their psychological integrity, and how effective are these strategies over time?

The study makes three principal contributions. First, it produces a culturally grounded phenomenological account of toxic leadership's psychological toll in an underrepresented national context. Second, it advances the Lipman-Blumen (2005) model by demonstrating its operation within a high power-distance, paternalistic cultural setting. Third, it generates practically actionable insights for organizational policymakers and human resource practitioners seeking to disrupt the delegitimization cycle in Indonesian organizations.

## 2. Literature Review

Toxic leadership refers to destructive leadership behaviors that progressively harm employees and organizations through manipulation, intimidation, bullying, and the abuse of power (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Toxic leaders often display low integrity, avoid accountability, and use charisma to maintain follower loyalty despite harmful actions (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Reed, 2004). The framework overlaps with concepts such as abusive supervision, despotic leadership, and narcissistic leadership (Tepper, 2000; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Research further highlights how manipulative communication, selective punishment, and information control strengthen toxic leaders' dominance within organizations (Mathieu et al., 2014; Schmidt, 2014).

Sustained exposure to toxic leadership frequently results in emotional exhaustion and psychological distress. Employees are forced to suppress emotions, maintain artificial positivity, and remain hypervigilant to avoid conflict, ultimately depleting their emotional resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Psychological distress may appear through anxiety, depression, irritability, and reduced concentration, often intensified by gaslighting, belittlement, and uncertainty created by toxic leaders (Mathieu et al., 2014; Tran, 2021). In high power-distance cultures, limited upward communication and weak organizational support further aggravate stress and reduce employees' ability to cope (Hofstede, 1984; Morrison, 2014).

Toxic leadership also encourages organizational silence and a culture of fear. Employees often avoid voicing concerns because they fear retaliation, exclusion, or professional risks, leading to defensive silence as the dominant response (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Van Dyne

et al., 2003). Toxic leaders reinforce this silence by punishing criticism and rewarding compliance, creating organizational climates marked by anxiety and self-censorship (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Such conditions weaken organizational learning, suppress innovation, and prevent corrective feedback processes (Edmondson, 1999; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). These dynamics are particularly strong in Indonesia, where high power distance and paternalistic leadership norms normalize authority and discourage resistance toward superiors (Hofstede, 1984; Cheng et al., 2004).

Within Indonesian organizational culture, paternalistic leadership often combines authoritarian control with perceived care and protection, generating loyalty among employees (Hamid et al., 2019; Hofstede et al., 2010). However, toxic leaders may exploit these cultural expectations by framing manipulative behavior as benevolent authority. This creates narrative dissonance, where harmful treatment is interpreted as concern or discipline, making employees less likely to recognize or challenge toxic practices. As a result, the delegitimization cycle becomes deeply embedded within organizational structures and social norms.

Employees adopt various coping strategies to survive toxic work environments. Emotion-focused coping, particularly seeking social support, may reduce stress when support systems are available (Cohen & Wills, 1985). However, in high power-distance cultures, employees often avoid discussing workplace problems due to fears of being viewed as disloyal or unprofessional (Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Many employees, therefore, rely on strategic compliance and behavioral conformity to avoid triggering leaders' hostility. Over time, prolonged exposure may lead to psychological disengagement, emotional withdrawal, and eventually voluntary turnover, which imposes high organizational costs through talent loss and declining institutional knowledge (Kahn, 1990; Tepper, 2000; Tran, 2021).

### 3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in Husserl's (1913) phenomenology and Moustakas's (1994) approach to lived experience research. The study specifically adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), developed by Smith et al. (2009), to explore how employees subjectively experience toxic leadership and interpret its psychological impacts within Indonesian organizational contexts. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because toxic leadership and its emotional consequences are deeply personal experiences that cannot be fully understood through quantitative methods alone (Creswell, 2014).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine informants who had experienced sustained exposure to toxic leadership in Indonesian private-sector organizations for at least six months, following the framework of Lipman-Blumen (2005). Participants came from various sectors, including finance, manufacturing, education, healthcare, IT, and hospitality. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 75–120 minutes, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to preserve the authenticity of participants' experiences. Interview discussions focused on toxic leadership behaviours, psychological responses, organizational culture, coping strategies, and organizational factors that enabled toxic practices.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure using ATLAS.ti software. Coding was conducted inductively to identify emerging themes related to employee delegitimization, emotional exhaustion, organizational silence, fear culture, and coping strategies. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria through member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, and reflexive memo writing. These procedures strengthened the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the findings.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Theme 1: Systematic Delegitimization of Employee Agency

The foundational dynamic identified across all nine participant accounts was a sustained pattern of behaviors through which the toxic leader progressively undermined the employees' sense of competence, credibility, and professional identity. This process was enacted through at least three behavioral mechanisms.

The first and most frequently cited mechanism was manipulative communication, encompassing verbal belittlement, shifting performance goalposts, and the strategic use of public humiliation. P3, a retail sales associate, recounted:

*"In front of the whole team, he would call my reports 'embarrassing.' But when I asked what the standard was, he would say something different every time. I began to believe that I truly could not work properly."*

This account aligns with Lipman-Blumen's (2005) characterization of the toxic leader's tendency to deploy brutal and unmerited criticism as a mechanism of dominance, and with Schmidt's (2014) observation that toxic leaders systematically generate perceived incompetence in subordinates to reinforce their own positional authority.

The second mechanism was reality distortion, or gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation in which the leader systematically contests the employee's perception of events. P7 reported:

*"She told me I had agreed to stay late on a day I definitely had not. When I showed her my notes from the meeting, she said I must have misunderstood. Over time, I stopped trusting my own memory. I thought perhaps I was the problem."*

The insidious feature of gaslighting as a delegitimization tactic lies precisely in its epistemic consequences: victims not only experience harm but progressively lose the cognitive tools necessary to accurately identify and report that harm (Mathieu et al., 2014). This has direct implications for the culture of silence analyzed in Theme 3.

The third mechanism was the selective and arbitrary deployment of punishment and reward. P8, a middle manager with 48 months of exposure, described this dynamic:

*"The same result that earned praise one week would be criticized the next. We never knew what he actually wanted. So we stopped trying to understand and simply tried to survive."*

The chronic unpredictability generated by this pattern produces a state of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) in which employees conclude that neither effort nor competence can reliably produce favorable outcomes, and accordingly withdraw investment from their work.

### Theme 2: Emotional Exhaustion as a Cumulative Psychophysiological Response

All nine informants reported symptoms consistent with clinical conceptualizations of emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), though they did not typically employ that terminology themselves. The accounts reveal a phenomenological trajectory in which initial attempts to cope energetically with a stressful environment give way progressively to a state of profound depletion.

P1, a financial analyst, described the early phase of this trajectory:

*"At first, I worked harder, thinking that if I produced good enough results, the treatment would improve. But after six months, I realized nothing would change. I became tired in a way I had not experienced before, not just physically, but as if something inside had emptied."*

This account captures the archetypal burnout trajectory in which initial engagement and effort give way to exhaustion following the failure of coping efforts (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). The language of internal emptiness, "something inside had emptied," reflects the phenomenological signature of emotional exhaustion as distinct from mere fatigue: it is experienced as an erosion of self, not merely a depletion of energy.

Multiple informants reported somatic manifestations accompanying their emotional exhaustion, including chronic insomnia, persistent headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, and repeated illness. P5, a nurse, noted with considerable personal irony:

*"I am a healthcare professional. I know the signs of burnout. But knowing did not protect me from it. By month eight, I was calling in sick more often than I had in my entire career. My body was reflecting what I could not say."*

This testimony is theoretically significant on two counts. First, it supports the literature's positioning of emotional exhaustion as a genuine psychophysiological condition with somatic correlates, not merely a subjective complaint (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Second, it illustrates the epistemic suppression produced by the culture of fear: P5 could express distress physically through somatic symptoms but could not voice it organizationally.

### **Theme 3: Culture of Fear and Organizational Silence**

Perhaps the most contextually distinctive theme to emerge from the Indonesian data concerns the co-production of organizational silence and a culture of fear through the interaction of toxic leadership behaviors with pre-existing cultural norms of high power distance and paternalistic authority. While both phenomena are documented in the international literature (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991), their particular configuration in the Indonesian context merits sustained analytical attention.

P4, a university lecturer with 36 months of exposure, articulated the role of power distance with unusual analytical clarity:

*"In our culture, you do not question someone who is your senior, especially not publicly. Even when what is happening is clearly wrong, you think: Who am I to say something? This is just how it is. And I think my supervisor knew this. He used it."*

This account exemplifies what Hofstede (1984) describes as the normative dimensions of high power-distance cultures, the internalized expectation that authority relationships are inherently and legitimately asymmetric. The critical additional element revealed in P4's account is the leader's awareness and deliberate exploitation of this cultural norm. This transforms the existing power-distance orientation from a passive organizational background condition into an active instrument of control, a dynamic that substantially increases the structural difficulty of employee resistance.

The paternalism dimension produced a distinctive variant of this silencing dynamic. Several informants reported difficulty in identifying their experience as genuinely harmful because the toxic leader's conduct was framed and culturally received through a paternalistic idiom of care. P2 described this dynamic:

*"He would say, 'I push you hard because I believe in your potential.' Or, 'I am strict because I want this team to be the best.' These are things a good father might say. So for a long time, I told myself: this is normal. This is how leaders here should be. I doubted my own pain."*

This testimony illuminates the mechanism through which paternalistic framing constitutes a particularly insidious form of delegitimation: it does not merely discourage the expression of distress, but actively undermines the employee's capacity to register distress as legitimate in the first instance. The cultural resonance of the paternalistic idiom, its alignment

with widely shared schemas of authority and care, renders it a highly effective instrument for narrative colonization of the employee's subjective experience.

#### **Theme 4: Adaptive Coping Strategies and Their Limitations**

Despite the structural constraints imposed by high power distance and the culture of fear, all nine informants demonstrated active rather than merely passive responses to their situations. This finding is significant: it qualifies any portrayal of employees in toxic environments as purely passive victims and documents the resilience and creativity of adaptive responses even under severely constrained conditions.

Problem-focused coping strategies attempt to modify the stressor rather than merely manage the emotional response to it were reported by six of nine informants. These included meticulous documentation of all interactions with the toxic leader, seeking informal mentorship from trusted senior colleagues outside the direct chain of command, and attempting to restructure workflows to minimize direct exposure. P6, a software developer, described his documentation strategy:

*"I kept records of every instruction I received, every email, every task change. It was partly for my own sanity to prove to myself that my memory was correct and partly so that if things became worse, I would have evidence."*

This strategy is notable as a direct adaptive response to the gaslighting identified in Theme 1: the documentation serves simultaneously as an epistemic anchor (preserving accurate perception) and a potential instrumental resource (providing evidentiary support for formal complaints).

Emotion-focused coping strategies were universally employed and included peer solidarity building, structured disengagement from work-related rumination during non-work hours, and the strategic performance of compliance to manage the leader's affect. The last of these strategic appeasements was the most consistently reported and the most psychologically costly:

*"I learned to read his moods. When he was in a bad state, I would avoid him, agree with everything, laugh at his jokes even when they were at my expense. It worked in the short term. But every time I did it, I felt something break a little inside me."*

Strategic appeasement, as this account reveals, exacts a high cost to the employee's sense of personal integrity and authentic self-expression. The cumulative toll of sustained self-betrayal of performing emotions and positions one does not hold contributes directly to the emotional exhaustion documented in Theme 2, thereby creating an intra-psychological version of the delegitimization cycle.

For four informants, the trajectory of coping ultimately terminated in psychological disengagement followed by actual or seriously considered voluntary turnover. P9 reflected:

*"In the final months, I was there but not really there. I did the minimum. I had given up caring about the work, which was genuinely painful because I had loved this job. Leaving was not an abandonment of the mission. It was a survival decision."*

This account captures the phenomenological intersection of psychological disengagement and turnover intention, a point at which the employee's adaptive resources are fully depleted, and exit from the toxic environment becomes the only remaining viable protective option. It also foregrounded a dimension frequently absent from the quantitative turnover literature: the grief that accompanies the decision to leave a role or organization one values, compounded by the recognition that the departure is driven by harm rather than opportunity.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reveals that toxic leadership systematically erodes employee well-being through emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, organizational silence, and fear. In Indonesian workplaces, high power-distance culture and paternalistic leadership norms further intensify these harmful effects by normalizing abusive authority and discouraging employee voice. The findings highlight that toxic leadership is not only an individual managerial issue but also a structural organizational problem that requires stronger psychological safety, leadership accountability, and supportive workplace policies to create healthier and more ethical work environments.

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