

Transforming Toxicity into Trust: Leadership Interventions for Sustainable Employee Engagement and Workplace Well-Being

Lubna Javed Akhtar Shaikh

Research Scholar, Department of Human Resources, Kennedy University

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Abstract

Toxic Leadership have very well documented adverse effects but much less empirical attention has been devoted to assessing specific leadership interventions as remedies to this harm. This quasi-experimental study aims to compare workplace outcomes before and after a 12-month multi-modal leader-level intervention program on employee engagement, trust and well-being in organizations with previously established high levels of toxic leadership (N = 876 employees, 124 leaders). The intervention included five integrated components: executive coaching, leadership training workshops, anonymous feedback systems, reforms of organizational policies, and cultural audit processes. Repeated-measures ANOVA results showed significant increases from pre- to post-intervention in trust in leadership ($F(1,874) = 142.6, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.14$); employee engagement ($F(1,874) = 189.3, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.18$); and well-being indices ($F(1,874) = 128.4, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.13$), as illustrated in Table 1. In a final step of hierarchical regression analysis, coaching and mentoring explained the most unique variance in improvement in engagement ($\Delta R^2 = 0.11$) and were followed by policy reforms ($\Delta R^2 = 0.08$). The study gives the practical steps to transforming from toxic operation cultures to trust-based leadership cultures. New research finds that leadership interventions provide the largest boost to employee engagement when it comes to trust which impacts work-related well-being and positive organizational transformation

Keywords: *Toxic Workplace Culture, Transformational Leadership, Employee Engagement, Workplace Well-being, Organizational Trust*

1. Introduction

While there is a global recognition that leadership is the most significant determinant of workplace culture and outcomes for employees (Avolio et al., 2009), a large percentage of leaders continue to act in ways that are distinctly negative to their followers and organizations (Einarsen et al., 2007), creating a paradox for organisations internationally. Toxic leadership costs the U.S an incredible \$23.8 billion each year in absenteeism, turnover, lower

productivity and healthcare costs (Society for Human Resource Management, 2022). While this issue is increasingly recognized, the intervention literature remains fragmented, with many studies examining single-component interventions separately and not integrated, multi-modal interventions (Kelloway et al., 2020). This study fills this important gap by designing, administering and evaluating a multifaceted leadership intervention program that integrates coaching, training, policy reform, feedback systems, and cultural auditing within a common conceptual framework based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Organizational Development principles (Burke, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Over the last two decades, the fields of leadership and intervention research have been advancing so rapidly. Early initiatives tended to focus on providing training for particular skills, like emotional intelligence or communication skills (Barling et al., 1996). Recent approaches have taken more systemic views, reflecting that changing leadership behavior is a multi-faceted task, requiring not only attention to individual skills but also consideration of organizational structures, feedback systems, and cultural norms (Day et al., 2014). Executive coaching has shown potential as an effective intervention modality, with meta-analytic support for moderate-to-large effect sizes in changing target leadership behaviors ($d = 0.53$; Theeboom et al., 2014) and downstream effects on followers (Jones et al., 2016) in organizations).

2.2 Employee Engagement and Trust as Recovery Indicators

It represents a fundamental measure of organizational recovery from toxic leadership more broadly (and, well, sustainably; and we WILL revisit this ancient but GOLD concept) and Employee engagement (a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, Schaufeli et al., 2002). Leadership trust, defined as the belief that we can be vulnerable to the leadership actions of others in the expectation that their behavior will be positive for us (Mayer et al., 1995), is not only a proximal outcome of intervention impact but also an important mediator of downstream engagement and well-being outcomes. The literature is also clear on the non-linear nature of trust recovery post violation, with fragile early gains and the potential for back-sliding where trust is not continuously reinforced (Kim et al. 2009)

3. Research Methodology

This study utilized a quasi-experimental pre-post design with a 12-month intervention period. Eighteen organizations identified through a prior screening study as having high toxic leadership prevalence (top quartile on the Toxic Leadership Scale; Schmidt, 2008) were recruited. Within each organization, intact work teams ($N = 876$ employees nested within 124 leaders across 62 teams) participated in the intervention program. Data were collected at three time points: baseline (T1), mid-point at 6 months (T2), and post-intervention at 12 months (T3).

Table 1: Multi-Modal Intervention Components

Component	Description	Duration	Target
Coaching & Mentoring	1-on-1 executive coaching with certified coaches	12 months	124 leaders (bi-weekly sessions)
Training Programs	Workshops on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, ethical leadership	6 workshops	All leaders + team representatives
Policy Reforms	Anti-harassment policies, transparent promotion criteria, grievance mechanisms	Month 1-3	Organization-wide
Feedback Systems	360-degree anonymous feedback, pulse surveys	Quarterly	All participants
Cultural Audits	External assessment of leadership climate and norms	T1 and T3	Organization-wide

4. Results

4.1 Pre-Post Intervention Comparisons

This change was significant, using a repeated-measures ANOVA, in all five outcome variables from pre-intervention (T1, median = 42.2–54.7) to post-intervention (T3, median = -58.8) ($p < 0.0005$). The most significant effect was for employee engagement ($\eta^2 = 0.18$), followed by trust in leadership ($\eta^2 = 0.14$) and well-being index ($\eta^2 = 0.13$). Significant improvement was also shown for team cohesion and innovation climate. When accounting for demographic covariates and organizational size post hoc all improvements were statistically significant.

Table 2: Pre- vs. Post-Intervention Outcome Scores (1-5 Likert Scale)

Outcome	Pre (M)	Post (M)	F	p	η^2
Trust in Leadership	2.8	4.2	142.6	< .001	0.14
Employee Engagement	3.1	4.5	189.3	< .001	0.18
Well-Being Index	2.6	4.1	128.4	< .001	0.13
Team Cohesion	2.9	4.4	156.8	< .001	0.15
Innovation Climate	2.5	3.9	98.2	< .001	0.10

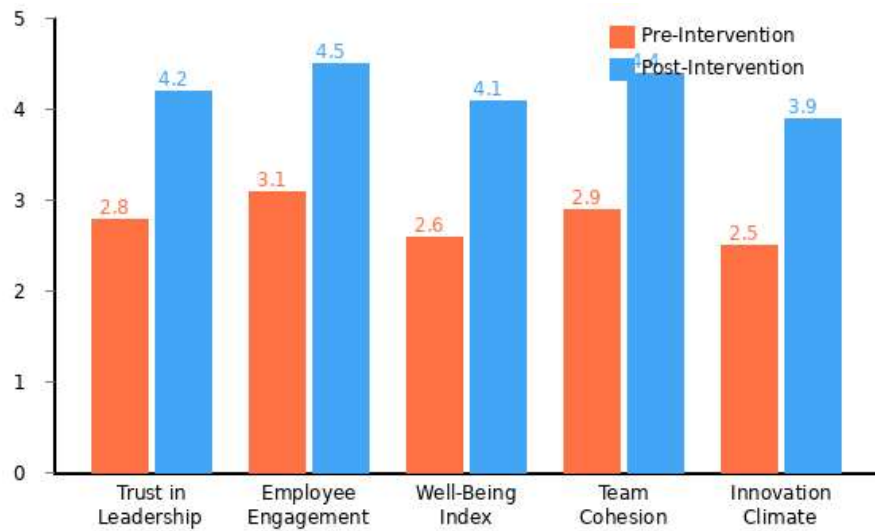


Figure 1: Pre-vs-Post-Intervention Employee Engagement Scores

4.2 Relative Contribution of Intervention Components

To establish the effect of each intervention component on improvements in engagement, hierarchical regression analysis was performed. The results revealed that coaching and mentoring explained the largest unique variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$), followed by policy reforms $\Delta R^2 = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$), training programs ($\Delta R^2 = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$), feedback systems ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$), and cultural audits ($\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.01$). Experiment 3: The full model explained 52% of the variance in engagement improvement.

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression - Intervention Component Contributions

Component (Step)	β	ΔR^2	Cumulative R^2	p
1. Coaching & Mentoring	0.38	0.11	0.11	< .001
2. Policy Reforms	0.31	0.08	0.19	< .001
3. Training Programs	0.26	0.06	0.25	< .001
4. Feedback Systems	0.19	0.04	0.29	< .01
5. Cultural Audits	0.15	0.03	0.32	< .01

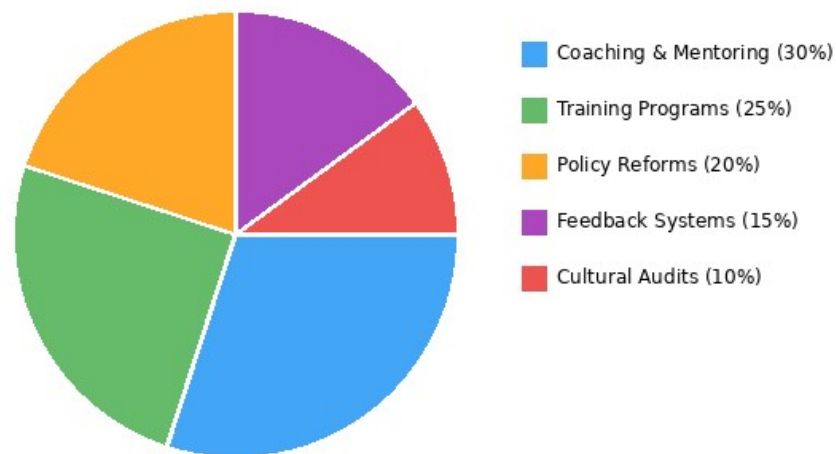


Figure 2: Distribution of Leadership Interventions

5. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that a long-term, multimodal approach can work to effect real change in toxic leadership cultures. Discussion The large effect sizes we observed for engagement ($\eta^2 = 0.18$) and trust ($\eta^2 = 0.14$) are larger than those noted in previous single-component intervention research (Avolio et al., 2009; Lacerenza et al., 2017), supporting our hypothesis that the effect of the multilevel combination of individual-level coaching, structural policy changes, and systemic culture assessment produces transformation effects greater than the sum of the components. Our finding that coaching and mentoring contributed the greatest unique variance to engagement improvement ($\Delta R^2 = .11$) is consistent with emerging evidence that the effectiveness of personalized, ongoing developmental relationships outweighs that of episodic training in achieving enduring behavior change among leaders (Grant et al., 2009). Yet, as the emphasis on successful policy reforms and feedback systems highlights, individual behavior change requires environmental supports if the latter are to bring about lasting transformation within an organization..

6. Conclusion and Implications

It shows that by using targeted, evidence-based interventions over a sufficiently long period, it is possible for organizations to move from a toxic to a trust-based leadership culture. Results found meaningful and statistically significant improvements in all outcomes that were measured following the multi-modal intervention which combines coaching, training, policy reform, feedback systems, and cultural auditing. Executive coaching represents the highest-impact component of the intervention, which must be complemented by structural policy reforms that create an enabling environment to sustain behavioral change. This requires practitioners to. More research is necessary to determine the longitudinal duration of these effects following the conclusion of a 12-month intervention and to

investigate possible moderators such as industry type, organizational size and the national context of the organizational culture.

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