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Understanding Toxic Leadership in Higher Education Work Places through Betrayal Trauma Theory

Abstract

The paper emanates from the Chancellor's address that I presented on the 5th of March 2019 at the University of South Africa. Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) was used as a lens in understanding toxic leadership in work places. BTT focuses on the ways in which toxic behaviour of leaders may violate or negatively affect trust and well-being of employees. Toxic leadership can bring negative consequences to employees' attitudes toward their leaders and organizations' well-being, and work behaviours. Employees are the less powerful individuals in the leader-employee relationship. They are characterized by a power differential and constrained in what they can do in response to unfavourable treatments they receive from their bosses.

Keywords: toxic leadership, dysfunctional, employee, organisation, Betrayal Trauma Theory, trust, workplace

Introduction

It is important to recognise dysfunctional behaviour in a leader as early as possible, before discontent and toxicity is spread to the organization. Savas (2019) is of the view that such leadership behaviour may show some earlier signs, such as, inadequate attention to employees, driving an agenda of self-interest and declining organizational climate in higher education due to conflicts in relations. If such dysfunctional behaviour is not recognised as soon as possible, then, the consequences of dysfunctional leadership can be huge, even well beyond the organization itself.

Method

The paper investigates toxic leadership in higher education work places. A qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were used together with Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) as a lens in understanding toxic leadership in higher education work places. Methods used in gathering information consisted of a literature review and document analysis.

Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to understand toxic leadership in higher education work places. Arguments in this paper may encourage positive social change by indicating solutions to improve higher education work environments, thereby increasing leader-employee well-being, and reducing turnover rates in higher education.

Research question

The overarching question this paper is trying to understand is: what do we understand by toxic leadership in higher education work places? Toxic leadership can bring negative consequences to employees' attitudes toward their leaders in higher education and the organization's, well-being, and work behaviours. Employees are the less powerful individuals in the leader-employee relationship. They are characterized by a power differential and constrained in what they can do in response to unfavourable treatments they receive from their bosses. Xia, Zhang and Li (2019) take the view that toxic leaders customarily perform hostile verbal or nonverbal behaviours toward their subordinates.

Betrayal Trauma Theory

This paper uses Betrayal Trauma Theory. This theory focuses on the ways in which toxic behaviour may significantly violate or negatively affect trust or well-being in higher education (Morris, Jr, 2019). Johnson (2018) is of the view that toxic leadership can exist in any organization. It is a style of leadership categorized by an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates and a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects an organizations' climate. In addition, it is a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated mainly by self-interest.

Therefore, toxic leadership in higher education work places can create toxic relationships among peers, in which personnel mirror the toxic behaviours of their leaders. The behavioural set of a toxic leader is also often referred as the 'dark-side of leadership' (Savas, 2019, p. 37). There are a lot of behaviours or practices that can be observed as part of the dark side. Therefore, authoritarianism and narcissism are the most common types of dysfunctional leadership in higher education. Also, abusive supervision and unpredictability are added to the classification (Savas, 2019). Before, proceeding to explain those, I would like to add also Machiavellianism, as a commonly observed toxic leadership behaviour to the list.

Authoritarianism is a "behaviour often associated with tyrants like Hitler, or Stalin" (Husain & Liebertz, 2019, p. 19). However, it is not limited to the area of politics, and commonly observed in higher education work places. Authoritarian leaders command and tell other people what to do, and often how to do it. They must exercise choice and reach a certain conviction, but its content must correspond to the official ideology (Germani, 2019). They offer to employees, limited autonomy and space for personal creativity and academic freedom. They tend to lead in a rigid hierarchical structure, with no flexibility. They are usually quick tempered, with little tolerance of failure (Savas, 2019). They demand absolute obedience from subordinates and penalise those acting otherwise. Abusive supervision is defined as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact. Unpredictability from a leadership in higher education can be a reason for stress and discomfort among the employees.

Most of the research on the dysfunctional leadership area assumes a leader to act in a certain way consistently, even if it is a toxic behaviour. Machiavellianism is also considered as part of the 'dark triad' of personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). It is

described as “aggressive, manipulative, exploiting and devious moves to achieve personal or organizational objectives” (Phillips & Gully, 2012, p. 85).

Marcus Garvey was born in 1887 in St. Ann’s Bay, Jamaica. His father was a stonemason and his mother was a household servant. One of the 11 children born to the couple, only Marcus and one sibling survived into adulthood. He fought for Freedom, Justice and Equality. His speaking engagements took on an angry tone, in which he questioned how the United States could call itself a Democracy when across the country people of colour were still oppressed. For example, in the United States, the following was observed when one academic was trying to recruit scholars to discuss biases in journal review processes:

Many faculty members were fearful about publicly sharing their academic lives on university campuses. Some said their narratives were too painful to share, while others expressed that they could be targeted because they were among a few, or the only ones in their departments. Others declined to participate because they felt that their untenured status would be at risk because some managers will target them. This illustrates toxic leadership (Jacques-Garvey, 2009).

There is a symbiotic relationship between leadership and power. Marcus Garvey in his work *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* reminds us that leadership means everything: ‘**Pain, blood and death**’ (Jacques-Garvey, 2009, p. 9). This, among other points, implies that leadership takes the metaphor of a battle field. For Garvey, leadership embraces power and he highlights that power is the only argument that satisfies man. He continues that a leader is not satisfied or moved by prayers or petitions. However, every leader is moved by that power of authority, which forces him to do things even against his will. People who lead forget when they come into power that they have an obligation to those who placed them in authority and through selfishness claim to themselves all that is good within the nation, to the exclusion of those who placed them in their positions of trust. “During leadership, it is natural that one should meet opposition because of ignorance, lack of knowledge and sympathy of the opposition in understanding fully the spirit of leadership” (Jacques-Garvey, 2009, p. 2).

Leaders who themselves experienced injustice and violations tend to behave abusively towards their followers. Negative leadership is associated with organizational and supervisory pressure which is a ‘trickle-down’ phenomenon in which pressure and stress ‘flows’ top down from one level to the next (Schilling, 2009, p. 120). Reed (2004) is of the view that a toxic leader bullies and threatens. There are three key elements of the toxic leadership syndrome, namely: an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates; a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate; and a conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest. Wilson-Starks (2003) views toxic leadership as an approach that harms people and, eventually, the organisation as well. In a toxic leadership environment, people are rewarded for agreeing with the boss and punished for thinking differently, and ‘yes’ people are rewarded and are promoted to leadership roles, while people who more fully engage their mental resources, critical thinking, and questioning skills are shut out from decision-making and positions of influence (Wilson-Starks, 2003).

The behaviour of toxic leadership

Toxic leaders engage in one or more of the following behaviours, namely: violating the basic human rights of their own supporters and others; demoralizing; intimidating; engaging in unethical activities; deliberately feeding their followers illusions that enhance the leader's power and impair the followers' capacity to act; playing to the basest fears and needs of their followers; in addition, they identify scapegoats and incite others to castigate them; and improperly cling to power (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). According to Aubrey (2012), toxic leaders create lasting and enduring harm to their organisations' culture and climate. They like to succeed by tearing others down. They also want to demonstrate their superiority and dominance over their subordinates (Tavanti, 2011). Toxic leaders have negative leadership tendencies such as insincere leadership; treating followers unjustly; not backing followers; distorting/withholding information, acting disloyally, authoritarian behaviour; attacking followers personally; being inapproachable; acting inconsiderately/ruthlessly, exerting pressure on followers; threatening/scaring followers; pushing goals and regulations; not bearing responsibility, and communicating insufficiently; and not recognizing or motivating (Schilling, 2009). From the perspective of reactions, individuals have the tendency to attempt to restore their own autonomy by withdrawing their efforts and engagement at work when they encounter threatening situations. Thus, employees perceived leaders' abusive treatments decrease their engagement related to helping behaviours to restore their own autonomy (Xia, Zhang & Li, 2019).

Leadership through others

A good leader inspires a team to have confidence in the leader. A great leader inspires a team to have confidence in themselves (Fargo, 2003). Management is paid to solve problems and make decisions; that is why we have such a tendency to rush in, to fix things. But we often fail to take the time to diagnose – to really, deeply understand the problem first. The highly effective manager seeks first to understand, and then to be understood (Covey, 2015).

Organisations are no longer built on force. They are increasingly built on trust. "Truthfulness requires a certain dose of the moral character trait of courage, persevering or pursuing what is good in spite of obstacles" (Turriago-Hoyos, Thoene & Arjoon, 2016, p. 6). Moreover, this presupposes that people ought to understand one another and "management must become the instrument through which cultural diversity can be made to serve the common purposes of mankind in higher education" (Oyler & Pryor, 2009, p. 422). To manage effectively is to unleash people, to remove the barriers and obstacles that crush and defeat the inherent commitment and creativity that people are otherwise prepared to offer. To have joy and pride in one's work is every one's right. Certainly, it is the manager who prevents it or makes it happen (Covey, 2015).

Ethical leaders use position power to serve others whereas unethical ones use power for personal gain and self-promotion. Unethical leaders use control and coercion to impose their goals while censoring opposing views. Destructive leaders describe dissidents and rivals in terms designed to devalue and isolate them while promoting in-group solidarity. "Leaders with personalized needs for power use

authority in an impetuously aggressive manner for self-aggrandizing purpose, to the detriment of their subordinates and organizations. They are impulsive, irresponsible, and extraordinarily punitive, involve dominance, grandiosity, arrogance, entitlement, and the selfish pursuit of pleasure.” (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007, p. 181).

Accountability and moral competence

Morris, Jr (2019) is of the view that unlike a toxic leader, an effective leader maintains employees’ self-esteem while showing errors made or production targets missed. Contrary to an accountable leader, a toxic leader might publicise employees’ lack of ability in a derogatory manner or ridicule them. Toxic leadership is not always intentional. For example, leaders with negative traits, such as poor communication or little experience, may be ineffective in their role, which may subsequently lead to unintentional toxicity. In general, ineffective leadership negatively affects the quality of life of the employees and lowers performance in the workplaces.

Accountability and moral competence are two factors that may have a positive effect on ethical leadership in organizations. Accountability involves assessing individual’s beliefs and feelings and observing and evaluating the performance and behaviour of self and others. An ethical leader promotes Ubuntu principles such as ethical behaviours and guidance, fairness, integrity, people orientation, power sharing, role clarification, and concern for sustainability through ethical leadership. A mechanism for enhancing ethical leadership is moral competence. Often, ethics and morals are used interchangeably; however, they are clearly different. **Ethics** refer to behaviours or decisions made by individuals within external values that are compatible with the social order system, whereas **morals** refer to internal principles that help individuals recognize what is right or wrong (Ghanem & Castelli, 2019).

Autocratic leaders make decisions without consulting their team members. However, this style can lead to high levels of absenteeism and staff turnover. Democratic leaders make the final decision, but they include team members in the decision-making process. They encourage creativity and employees are often highly engaged in projects and decisions. As a result, team members tend to have high job satisfaction and high productivity (Sousa & Rocha, 2019).

I argue for transformational leadership in higher education work places, where the leader(s) should develop a vision, accountability, responsibility, Ubuntu, respect and trust. The leadership ought to pay personal attention to employees and provide them with intellectual stimulation, challenge them with new ideas and approaches; to ensure that decisions made are democratic; to promote knowledge sharing and help to resolve problems; to welcome different viewpoints; to provide constructive criticism and agree to differ; to involve everyone in the organisational activities by identifying strengths and challenges of all employees. Also, to be able to change problematic behaviours; incentivise employees to seize opportunities to grow and improve; to trust in employee's effectiveness; to create and foster a vision of a new future; to promote creativity and eliminate resistances by changing the mindsets, and to create a willingness to separate from the past ‘**injustices**’ (Sousa & Rocha, 2019, p. 364).

Higher education work places require a collegial type of leadership that relies on intrinsic awards such as friendship, collaboration and shared values. A ‘**Nut Island**

Effect' should be avoided whereby a leader **ruins a team of deeply committed members**. In other words, if the leader lacks the strategic grip over the organization, individuals tend to focus on roles or individual accomplishments at the cost of the prime mission of the higher education organization itself (Dinesh, 2019, p. 43).

Toxic leaderships tend to minimize their personal discomfort by shifting the blame to other persons and circumstances in conditions of ambiguity, such as unpredictable outcomes. The presence of "a leader who can inspire employees can make a lot of difference in an organisation" (Dinesh, 2019, p. 44).

Findings

The paper recognizes toxic leadership in higher education as a work place stressor for employees. Demotivation can be caused by negative treatments from the leadership, and the employees will not necessarily attribute that negative emotion to their colleagues who are also victims in the organization. In addition, employees will experience their leaders' negative interpersonal treatments together, which can make it necessary for them to rebel against the leadership quietly.

It is important for leaders to avoid showing abusive behaviours in higher education work places and to spend time and money training to change their toxic behaviour patterns even if these behaviours are unconscious. Managers should be alert to employees' efficacy changes caused by toxic leadership behaviours. It should be noted that once employees' self-efficacy decreases, they are likely to withdraw their engagement in those organisations. Generally, toxic leadership can easily increase the employees' negative levels. Leaders should also bear in mind that employees who are victims at the same time will get together to struggle against the leaders' harassment.

Conclusion

My thesis is that successful higher education institutions as organisations will have to shift from hierarchical leadership structures to more collaborative leadership models that will be influenced by the digital revolution where individuals and organisations will engage and collaborate using the internet. Leaders should have **contextual** (the mind), **emotional** (the heart), **inspired** (the soul), **physical** (the body) and **technological** intelligences for coping in leading higher education institutions in the fourth industrial revolution era.

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