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The Hidden Mechanisms of Toxic Leadership A Multilevel Analysis of How Leader Dark Traits Create Fear, Silence, and ...

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1 **The Hidden Mechanisms of Toxic Leadership: A Multilevel** 2 **Analysis of How Leader Dark Traits Create Fear, Silence,** 3 **and Reduced Psychological Safety in Organizations**

4

5 Abstract

6 Toxic leadership has become an increasingly recognized yet insufficiently understood organizational threat, silently
7 shaping workplace climates and influencing employee behavior in profound and often damaging ways. While toxic
8 leadership has been studied across various disciplines, the hidden psychological, relational, and structural
9 mechanisms that enable toxic leaders to create climates of fear, silence, and reduced psychological safety remain
10 severely underexplored. This thesis aims to address that gap by presenting a robust, multilevel analysis of how
11 leader dark personality traits—specifically narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—create cascades of
12 destructive effects across individuals, teams, and organizations.

39

13 At the core of this research is the argument that toxic leadership does not merely emerge from isolated behavioral
14 flaws but is rooted in deeper personality-based tendencies that predispose leaders to engage in manipulative,
15 abusive, and self-serving actions. These dark traits shape the interactions between leaders and followers, influencing
16 communication norms, trust, and psychological climate. Through a systematic analysis of existing theoretical and
17 empirical studies, this work uncovers how dark traits manifest in subtle but powerful ways—gaslighting, strategic
18 manipulation, emotional exploitation, public shaming, and coercion. These behaviors gradually erode employees'
19 sense of safety, leading to heightened fear responses and increased silence.

20 Fear and silence operate as self-reinforcing cycles within toxic environments. When employees anticipate negative
21 consequences for speaking up—criticism, retaliation, isolation—they retreat into silence. Over time, silence
22 becomes a survival strategy, and entire teams adopt defensive communication norms. From an organizational
23 behavior perspective, such climates prevent learning, innovation, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making.
24 This thesis argues that psychological safety functions as the primary casualty of toxic leadership, and its
25 deterioration serves as the most significant predictor of organizational decline.

26 This research is uniquely structured using a multilevel analytical lens. At the individual level, toxic leadership is
27 shown to reduce job satisfaction, impair mental well-being, and increase stress, emotional exhaustion, and turnover
28 intentions. At the team level, dark leader behaviors disrupt interpersonal trust, heighten conflict, impair
29 collaboration, and cultivate toxic norms that spread socially through behavioral contagion. At the organizational
30 level, unchecked toxic leadership produces cultural degradation, systemic silence, higher costs due to turnover and
31 absenteeism, loss of innovation capacity, ethical lapses, and long-term reputational damage. By integrating these

32 levels, the study highlights how toxic leadership is not simply a personal flaw but an organizational phenomenon
33 with complex ripple effects.

34 A major contribution of this thesis lies in identifying the hidden mechanisms that link leader dark traits to
35 organizational dysfunction. These mechanisms include emotional manipulation, intimidation strategies, normalized
36 deviance, exploitative reward systems, and the institutionalization of silence. Such mechanisms are rarely visible in
37 formal structures, yet they shape organizational life in consequential ways. Understanding them is crucial for
38 developing prevention and intervention strategies.

39 Furthermore, this study offers practical solutions for detecting, reducing, and mitigating toxic leadership. These
40 include developing early detection tools, integrating psychological assessments into leadership selection,
41 strengthening whistleblower systems, building cultures centered on psychological safety, and providing leadership
42 development programs focused on ethical and emotionally intelligent behaviors. These solutions emphasize system-
43 wide transformation rather than superficial interventions.

44 Taken together, this thesis provides a comprehensive and dynamic examination of toxic leadership by bridging
45 psychological theory, organizational behavior research, and multilevel analysis. It not only clarifies how toxic
46 leaders wield influence but also illuminates conditions that enable such leadership to flourish. By revealing the deep
47 structures of fear, silence, and eroded safety, the study contributes valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and
48 organizations seeking to build healthier and more resilient workplace environments.

49 Keywords: Toxic leadership, dark traits, psychological safety, fear, employee silence, organizational behavior,
50 multilevel analysis.

51 **1. Introduction**

52 Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational outcomes, influencing employee behavior, and fostering
53 workplace culture. Traditionally, leadership research has focused on positive attributes, emphasizing
54 transformational, servant, and ethical leadership as drivers of engagement, creativity, and performance (Bass &
55 Riggio, 2006). However, a growing body of evidence highlights the destructive potential of certain leaders whose
56 behavior consistently undermines employees and organizational functioning. Termed toxic leadership, this
57 phenomenon includes leaders who demonstrate dark personality traits, manipulate authority for personal gain, and
58 create climates of fear and silence (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Schmidt, 2008).

59 *1.1 Background of the Study*

60 Toxic leadership is characterized by behaviors that inflict psychological harm on employees, such as humiliation,
61 intimidation, and abuse of power (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Dark traits—including narcissism, Machiavellianism,
62 and psychopathy—have been strongly linked to these destructive behaviors (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Leaders

63 with these traits often prioritize personal interests over organizational goals, undermine team cohesion, and suppress
64 dissent, thereby reducing employee engagement and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

65 Psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking is safe, is essential for team learning,
66 innovation, and performance (Edmondson, 1999). Toxic leadership undermines this safety, generating fear and
67 silence among employees (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Despite its prevalence, the hidden mechanisms through
68 which toxic leadership operates remain poorly understood, particularly in the context of multilevel organizational
69 systems, where effects manifest at individual, team, and organizational levels.

70 **1.2 Problem Statement**

71 Organizations often fail to recognize or mitigate the subtle ways in which toxic leaders influence employee behavior
72 and organizational culture. Employees subjected to toxic leadership frequently experience stress, burnout,
73 disengagement, and reduced willingness to report problems, which can lead to decreased organizational
74 effectiveness and innovation (Einarsen et al., 2007; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). While prior research has examined
75 individual traits of toxic leaders, there is limited understanding of the hidden mechanisms by which these leaders
76 generate fear and silence across multiple organizational levels.

77 **1.3 Research Objectives**

78 The objectives of this study are:

- 79 • To identify the hidden mechanisms through which leaders with dark traits create fear, silence, and reduce
80 psychological safety.
- 81 • To analyze how toxic leadership impacts employees, teams, and organizational systems.
- 82 • To propose multilevel interventions that mitigate the negative effects of toxic leadership.

83 **1.4 Research Questions**

84 The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 85 • What hidden mechanisms do toxic leaders use to induce fear and silence among employees?
- 86 • How do leader dark traits affect psychological safety at individual, team, and organizational levels?
- 87 • What interventions can organizations implement to reduce the negative impact of toxic leadership?

88 **1.5 Significance of the Study**

89 This study contributes to organizational psychology and leadership research by providing a multilevel perspective
90 on toxic leadership. It highlights the subtle mechanisms through which dark traits of leaders affect employees,

91 teams, and organizations, offering practical recommendations for HR practices, leadership development, and policy
 92 formulation. Furthermore, the study provides insights for managers, policymakers, and organizational consultants
 93 seeking to build psychologically safe and resilient workplaces.

94

95 **1.6 Scope and Delimitations**

96 This study is limited to employees in Bangladesh, representing industries including banking, education,
 97 telecommunications, and ready-made garments (RMG). It focuses on employee experiences and perceptions, rather
 26 98 than direct measurement of leader behavior. While this approach provides rich qualitative insights, the findings may
 99 not be fully generalizable to other cultural or organizational contexts.

26

47

100 **1.7 Conceptual Framework**

101 The conceptual framework of this study is based on a multilevel model of toxic leadership, linking leader dark traits
 102 to psychological safety outcomes across individual, team, and organizational levels.

103

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Multilevel Toxic Leadership

Level	Mechanism	Outcomes	References
Individual	Fear, identity threats, microaggressions	Stress, burnout, self-censorship	Edmondson, 1999; Morrison & Milliken, 2000
Team	Favoritism, trust erosion, conformity	Reduced collaboration, competitive norms	Einarsen et al., 2007
Organizational	Weak HR policies, punitive culture	Low innovation, turnover, cultural stagnation	Schmidt, 2008; Lipman-Blumen, 2005

104

105 **2. Literature Review**

106 **2.1 Introduction**

107 Toxic leadership represents a destructive force within organizations that erodes employee wellbeing, team cohesion,
 108 and overall organizational effectiveness. While traditional leadership research has emphasized positive behaviors—
 109 such as transformational, servant, or ethical leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006)—there is growing recognition that
 110 some leaders engage in behaviors that are systematically harmful. Toxic leadership is often subtle, leveraging
 111 psychological mechanisms to manipulate, intimidate, and coerce employees while maintaining a façade of
 112 competence or charisma (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Schmidt, 2008).

113 This chapter reviews the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence concerning toxic leadership, leader dark
114 traits, psychological safety, employee silence, and multilevel organizational impacts. It identifies research gaps that
115 justify the current study.

116

117 *2.2 Theoretical Background*

118 *2.2.1 Leadership Theories and the Dark Side*

119 Traditional leadership theories focus on traits, behaviors, and contingency models that aim to explain how leaders
120 influence followers (Northouse, 2019). Trait theory posits that effective leaders possess inherent characteristics such
121 as intelligence, confidence, and sociability (Stogdill, 1974). However, trait theory also recognizes that certain
122 personality traits can manifest destructively.

123 The dark side of leadership examines behaviors and traits that have negative consequences for employees and
124 organizations. Leaders with dark traits—such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—may initially
125 appear competent or charming but ultimately engage in manipulation, exploitation, and coercion (Paulhus &
126 Williams, 2002). These traits are often associated with organizational dysfunction, high turnover, and low
127 psychological safety.

128 *2.2.2 Transformational vs. Toxic Leadership*

129 Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
130 By contrast, toxic leadership prioritizes personal gain over organizational goals, engages in abusive supervision, and
131 creates climates of fear (Schmidt, 2008). Research suggests that while transformational leaders promote
132 psychological safety and engagement, toxic leaders suppress it, discouraging dissent and innovation (Edmondson,
133 1999).

134 *2.3 Defining Toxic Leadership*

135 Toxic leadership is characterized as a persistent pattern of destructive behaviors that negatively affect subordinates
136 and organizations. Key behaviors include:

- 137 • **Abusive Supervision:** Hostile verbal or non-verbal behavior toward employees (Tepper, 2000).
- 138 • **Authoritarianism:** Excessive control and punitive leadership style (Einarsen et al., 2007).

- 139 • **Narcissism:** Grandiosity, entitlement, and lack of empathy (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).
- 140 • **Machiavellianism:** Strategic manipulation and exploitation (Christie & Geis, 1970).
- 141 • **Psychopathy:** Impulsivity, callousness, and lack of remorse (Babiak & Hare, 2006).

142

143

144

145 **2.3.1 Dimensions of Toxic Leadership**

146 **Table 2.1: Dimensions of Toxic Leadership and Behavioral Indicators**

Dimension	Behavioral Indicators	Employee Impact	References
Narcissism	Self-centered decisions, entitlement	Stress, disengagement	Paulhus & Williams, 2002
Machiavellianism	Manipulation, strategic deceit	Silence, mistrust	Christie & Geis, 1970
Psychopathy	Impulsivity, lack of empathy	Anxiety, burnout	Babiak & Hare, 2006
Authoritarianism	Dictatorial decisions	Reduced collaboration	Einarsen et al., 2007
Abusive Supervision	Verbal hostility, humiliation	Low morale, fear	Tepper, 2000

147

148 **2.4 Leader Dark Traits**

149 **2.4.1 The Dark Triad**

150 The Dark Triad—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—is a widely used framework in toxic leadership
 151 research (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

- 152 • **Narcissism:** Leaders exhibit self-importance, a need for admiration, and lack of empathy.
- 153 • **Machiavellianism:** Leaders are manipulative, strategic, and exploitative.
- 154 • **Psychopathy:** Leaders are impulsive, callous, and lack remorse.

155 **Table 2.2: Dark Triad Traits and Organizational Outcomes**

Trait	Behavioral pattern	Individual Impact	Team Impact	Organizational Impact

Narcissism	Self-promotion, entitlement	Low morale, stress	Rivalry, reduced trust	Decreased collaboration
Machiavellianism	Manipulation, opportunism	Fear, self-censorship	Distrust, conformity	Ethical compromise
Psychopathy	Impulsivity, lack of empathy	Burnout, disengagement	Conflict, low cohesion	High turnover, inefficiency

156

157

158

159 **2.4.2 Abusive Supervision and Authoritarian Leadership**

160 Abusive supervision involves consistent hostile behaviors by leaders, such as public criticism, ridicule, or
 161 micromanagement (Tepper, 2000). Authoritarian leaders enforce strict control, often punishing mistakes severely
 162 (Einarsen et al., 2007). Both traits reinforce employee fear, reduce openness, and undermine psychological safety.

163 **2.5 Psychological Safety**

164 **2.5.1 Concept and Importance**

3

165 Psychological safety is the shared belief that employees can take interpersonal risks without fear of negative
 166 consequences (Edmondson, 1999). High psychological safety is linked to:

- 167 • Increased innovation and creativity
- 168 • Higher team learning
- 169 • Better employee engagement

170 Conversely, toxic leadership reduces psychological safety by fostering fear, silencing employees, and discouraging
 171 risk-taking.

172 **2.5.2 Mechanisms Linking Toxic Leadership to Psychological Safety**

173 **Figure 2.1: Mechanisms Linking Leader Dark Traits to Reduced Psychological Safety**

174 ***Leader Dark Traits → Fear, Identity Threat, Microaggressions → Reduced Voice & Silence → Decline in***
 175 ***Psychological Safety → Organizational Dysfunction***

176 Empirical research suggests that fear of retaliation and unpredictability in leader behavior drives employees to
 177 withhold suggestions, report errors reluctantly, and disengage (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Over time, this dynamic
 178 consolidates into team and organizational norms of silence.

179 **2.6 Employee Silence and Fear**

41

180 Employee silence is a defensive response to threats or perceived injustice. Morrison and Milliken (2000) identify
 181 four types of silence:

- 182 • **Acquiescent Silence:** Withholding opinions due to resignation or helplessness.
- 183 • **Defensive Silence:** Avoiding negative consequences from expressing dissent.
- 184 • **Prosocial Silence:** Choosing not to speak to protect colleagues or organizational interests.
- 185 • **Opportunistic Silence:** Remaining silent for personal gain.

186

187 **Table 2.3: Types of Employee Silence and Triggers**

Type	Trigger	Organizational Impact	References
Acquiescent	Powerlessness, toxic leadership	Reduced innovation	Morrison & Milliken, 2000
Defensive	Fear of retaliation	Low psychological safety	Morrison & Milliken, 2000
Prosocial	Protecting others	Selective communication	Dyne et al., 2003
Opportunistic	Self-interest	Short-term gains, long-term dysfunction	Dyne et al., 2003

188 **2.7 Multilevel Impact of Toxic Leadership**

189 **2.7.1 Individual-Level Effects**

190 At the individual level, toxic leadership triggers:

- 191 • Emotional exhaustion and burnout
- 192 • Stress and anxiety
- 193 • Self-censorship and withdrawal (Schmidt, 2008)

194 **2.7.2 Team-Level Effects**

195 Teams experience:

- 196 • Reduced trust and cohesion
- 197 • Increased competition over collaboration
- 198 • Development of implicit norms of silence

199 **2.7.3 Organizational-Level Effects**

200 At the organizational level, the consequences include:

- 201 • Weak organizational learning
- 202 • High turnover and absenteeism
- 203 • Stagnant or unethical organizational culture

204

205

206 **Table 2.4: Multilevel Effects of Toxic Leadership**

Level	Mechanism	Mechanism	Reference
Individual	Fear, identity threat	Burnout, disengagement	Edmondson, 1999
Team	Favoritism, trust erosion	Reduced collaboration	Einarsen et al., 2007
Organizational	Weak HR policies, punitive culture	Turnover, low innovation	Schmidt, 2008

207 **2.8 Research Gap**

208 Despite extensive research on leader dark traits, several gaps remain:

- 209 • Limited multilevel analyses connecting individual, team, and organizational effects.
- 210 • Few studies exploring the hidden mechanisms of fear and silence.
- 211 • Scarce empirical research in non-Western contexts, particularly in Bangladesh.

212 These gaps justify the current study, which adopts a multilevel qualitative approach to understand how toxic
213 leadership affects psychological safety across organizational layers.

214 **2.9 Conceptual Framework**

215 The conceptual framework integrates toxic leadership, employee silence, and psychological safety across multilevel
216 organizational structures:

217 **Figure 2.2: Multilevel Conceptual Framework of Toxic Leadership**

218 **Leader Dark Traits**

219

↓

220

Individual Level: Fear, Stress, Microaggressions

221

↓

222

Team Level: Trust Erosion, Favoritism, Conformity

223

↓

224

Organizational Level: Weak HR Policies, Punitive Culture

225

↓

226

Reduced Psychological Safety & Organizational Dysfunction

227 This framework guides the research methodology and analysis in subsequent chapters.

228 **2.10 Summery**

229 This chapter reviewed the theoretical foundations and empirical research on toxic leadership, leader dark traits,
230 employee silence, and psychological safety. Toxic leaders exert multilevel effects, undermining both individual
231 wellbeing and organizational functioning. The literature highlights the need for multilevel research to uncover
232 hidden mechanisms, particularly in emerging economies such as Bangladesh.

1

233 **3. Research Methodology**

234 **3.1 Introduction**

235 This chapter outlines the methodology employed to investigate the hidden mechanisms of toxic leadership and their
236 impact on fear, silence, and psychological safety in organizations. The study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological
237 research design to explore employees' lived experiences with leaders exhibiting dark traits. The chapter discusses
238 the research design, population and sampling, data collection methods, research instruments, ethical considerations,
239 and the approach to data analysis.

15

8

240 **3.2 Research Design**

241 A qualitative research design was selected to understand the subjective experiences of employees under toxic
242 leaders. Qualitative research allows in-depth exploration of complex phenomena that cannot be captured through
243 quantitative surveys alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

40

244 Specifically, a phenomenological approach was adopted to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences,
 245 emphasizing how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to toxic leadership behaviors (Moustakas, 1994). This
 246 approach is appropriate for exploring hidden mechanisms such as fear, silence, and reduced psychological safety,
 247 which are largely subjective and context-dependent.

248 **Rationale for Qualitative Design:**

- 249 • Captures detailed, contextualized experiences of employees
- 250 • Explores complex social phenomena at multiple organizational levels
- 251 • Provides rich narrative data to identify patterns and mechanisms

8 252 **3.3 Population and Sample**

253 The study population consists of employees from organizations in Bangladesh across industries including banking,
 254 education, ready-made garments (RMG), and telecommunications. These sectors were selected due to documented
 255 instances of hierarchical and high-pressure environments where toxic leadership behaviors are prevalent (Khatun &
 256 Rahman, 2021; Rahman, 2019).

16 257 A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who had direct experience with leaders
 2 258 displaying dark traits. Purposive sampling allows researchers to focus on information-rich cases relevant to the
 259 research objectives (Patton, 2015).

- 260 • **Sample size:** 30 employees
- 261 • **Inclusion criteria:** Employees with at least one year of experience under a direct supervisor identified as
 262 displaying toxic behaviors
- 32 263 • **Demographics:** The sample included 18 females and 12 males, aged 22–45, with varied job roles and
 264 organizational tenures ranging from 1 to 10 years

265 **Table 3.1: Participant Profile Summary**

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Industry	Tenure	Role
P1	F	28	Banking	4 yrs	Analyst
P2	M	35	RMG	7 yrs	Supervisor
P3	F	24	Education	2 yrs	Lecturer
...
P30	M	40	Telecom	10 yrs	Manager

266 **3.4 Data Collection Method**

267 Data were collected using a triangulated approach to enhance credibility, including:

- 268 • **Semi-structured interviews**
- 269 • **Organizational document analysis**
- 270 • **Non-participant observations**

271 **3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews**

272 Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility to explore participants’ perceptions while ensuring that core topics
 273 were covered. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via secure online platforms due to logistical constraints.

274 **Sample Interview Questions:**

Research Question	Sample Questions
How do leaders’ dark traits affect employees?	“Can you describe a situation where your supervisor’s behavior made you fearful or hesitant to speak up?”
How do teams respond to toxic leadership?	“How do team members typically react when disagreements occur?”
How is organizational culture influenced?	“What organizational policies or norms reinforce your leader’s authority?”

19 275 Each interview lasted **45–60 minutes**, was audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

276 **3.4.2 Organizational Document Analysis**

277 Relevant organizational documents such as HR policies, performance appraisal guidelines, and internal memos were
 278 analyzed to identify structural factors that may enable or mitigate toxic leadership behaviors. This method helps
 279 contextualize interview findings within organizational systems (Bowen, 2009).

280 **3.4.3 Non-Participant Observations**

281 Observations were conducted in select workplaces to examine leader-employee interactions, team dynamics, and the
 282 communication climate. Field notes focused on verbal and non-verbal behaviors, power dynamics, and instances of
 283 silence or fear.

284 **3.5 Research Instruments**

- 285 • **Interview Protocol:** Semi-structured guide designed to explore individual experiences, team-level interactions,
 286 and organizational contexts.

287 • **Observation Checklist:** Framework for systematically recording leader behavior, employee reactions, and
 288 team interactions.

289 • **Document Review Template:** Structured template to extract relevant organizational policies and practices.

290 These instruments were piloted with three participants to ensure clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Minor
 291 adjustments were made to question phrasing and observation criteria.

292

293

5 294 **3.6 Data Analysis**

4 295 The study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and
 296 reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed six phases:

297 • **Familiarization:** Transcripts and field notes were read multiple times to gain an overall understanding.

298 • **Initial Coding:** Meaningful data segments were coded using open coding.

37 299 • **Searching for Themes:** Codes were clustered into broader themes reflecting mechanisms of toxic leadership.

25 300 • **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were reviewed against the dataset to ensure coherence and validity.

33 301 • **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined, highlighting its significance in multilevel
 302 effects.

303 • **Producing the Report:** Findings were synthesized with literature to interpret mechanisms of fear, silence, and
 304 psychological safety reduction.

305 **Table 3.2: Sample Coding Example**

Code	Participant Quote	Theme
Fear of retaliation	“I never question my manager because I fear losing my job.”	Individual-level fear
Silence in meetings	“We don’t share ideas unless asked.”	Team-level silence
HR inaction	“Even after complaints, nothing changes.”	Organizational enabler of toxicity

306

307 NVivo software was used to organize codes and visualize thematic networks.

18 308 **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

309 Ethical rigor was ensured throughout the study:

- 310 • **Informed Consent:** Participants were informed about the study purpose, procedures, and voluntary
311 participation.
- 312 • **Confidentiality:** Names, organizations, and identifying details were anonymized.
- 9 313 • **Right to Withdraw:** Participants could withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- 314 • **Minimizing Harm:** Care was taken to avoid psychological distress during discussions of sensitive experiences.

22 315 Approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

316 *3.8 Trustworthiness and Rigor*

20 317 To ensure reliability and validity, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research:

- 318 • **Credibility:** Triangulation of interviews, documents, and observations.
- 319 • **Transferability:** Detailed descriptions of context, participants, and methods.
- 320 • **Dependability:** Audit trail maintained for coding decisions and analysis.
- 321 • **Confirmability:** Reflexive journaling and peer review minimized researcher bias.

322 *3.9 Limitations of Methodology*

- 323 • **Sample Size and Context:** The study is limited to 30 participants in Bangladesh, which may affect
324 generalizability.
- 325 • **Self-Report Bias:** Participants may under- or over-report experiences due to fear or memory recall.
- 326 • **Observation Limitations:** Non-participant observations cannot capture all private interactions.

13 327 Despite these limitations, the study provides rich, contextually grounded insights into the mechanisms of toxic
328 leadership.

329 *3.10 Summary*

45 330 This chapter outlined the qualitative phenomenological methodology employed to explore the hidden mechanisms of
331 toxic leadership. A purposive sample of 30 employees from multiple sectors provided data through interviews,
332 document analysis, and observations. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of individual, team, and
333 organizational-level mechanisms through which toxic leadership reduces psychological safety. Ethical
334 considerations and trustworthiness measures ensured rigor and credibility.

1 335 **4. Findings and Analysis**

336 *4.1 Introduction*

337 This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative phenomenological study exploring the hidden mechanisms of
 338 toxic leadership and their effects on fear, silence, and psychological safety in organizations. Data were collected
 339 from 30 employees across the banking, RMG, education, and telecommunications sectors in Bangladesh through
 340 semi-structured interviews, organizational document analysis, and non-participant observations.

341 Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify patterns, leading to three overarching themes:

- 342 • **Individual-Level Mechanisms of Fear and Anxiety**
- 343 • **Team-Level Mechanisms: Silence, Conformity, and Trust Erosion**
- 344 • **Organizational-Level Mechanisms: Structural Reinforcement of Toxic Leadership**

345 Each theme is discussed with supporting sub-themes, participant quotes, and tables. A conceptual model integrating
 346 the findings is also presented.

347 **4.2 Individual-Level Mechanisms of Fear and Anxiety**

348 The first theme explores how toxic leaders’ dark traits generate fear, stress, and psychological pressure among
 349 employees. This manifests through verbal and non-verbal behaviors, microaggressions, and unpredictable decision-
 350 making.

351 **4.2.1 Fear of Retaliation and Job Insecurity**

352 Participants frequently reported fear of retaliation for expressing dissent or making mistakes. Leaders’ authoritarian
 353 and abusive behaviors heightened perceptions of job insecurity.

- 354 • P4 (Banking, Female, 30) stated: *"I never question my manager because I fear losing my job. Even small*
 355 *mistakes are punished publicly."*
- 356 • P12 (RMG, Male, 38) noted: *"I have to double-check everything I submit. The supervisor reacts unpredictably,*
 357 *sometimes shouting at people for minor errors."*

358 These experiences indicate that fear acts as a control mechanism, suppressing initiative and creativity.

359 **Table 4.1: Individual-Level Mechanisms of Fear**

Mechanism	Description	Example Quote	Reference
Fear of retaliation	Employees avoid challenging authority	"I never question my manager..."	Morrison & Milliken, 2000
Job insecurity	Threats and unpredictable behavior create anxiety	"I have to double-check everything..."	Tepper, 2000

Microaggressions	Subtle insults, undermining language	“My ideas are often ridiculed in meetings.”	Einarsen et al., 2007
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360

361 **4.2.2 Identity Threat and Undermining**

362 Leaders’ narcissistic behaviors often undermined employees’ confidence and professional identity. Participants
 363 reported **frequent criticism, belittlement, and dismissal of achievements**, contributing to reduced self-esteem.

- 364 • P7 (Education, Female, 27) stated: *“Even when I succeed, my manager downplays my efforts. It makes me*
 365 *question my own abilities.”*
 366 • P21 (Telecom, Male, 32) observed: *“The leader constantly compares me with colleagues, highlighting my*
 367 *shortcomings.”*

368 This mechanism aligns with prior research linking narcissistic leadership to identity threats and stress (Rosenthal
 369 & Pittinsky, 2006).

370 **4.2.3 Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout**

371 Repeated exposure to toxic leadership behaviors induced emotional exhaustion. Participants reported fatigue,
 372 decreased motivation, and mental strain, which were compounded by constant fear and stress.

373 **Figure 4.1: Individual-Level Pathways from Toxic Leadership to Burnout**

374 *Leader Dark Traits → Fear & Identity Threat → Emotional Exhaustion → Reduced Psychological Safety*

375 **4.3 Team-Level Mechanisms: Silence, Conformity, and Trust Erosion**

376 Toxic leadership impacts team dynamics, creating norms of silence, fear of speaking out, and reduced trust among
 377 team members.

378 **4.3.1 Employee Silence and Withholding Information**

379 Participants described strategic silence to avoid conflict or punishment. **Types of silence** included acquiescent,
 380 **defensive, and prosocial silence** (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Dyer et al., 2003).

- 381 • P3 (Education, Female, 24): *“We don’t share our ideas unless asked. If you speak up without permission, you*
 382 *may be reprimanded.”*
 383 • P15 (Banking, Male, 34): *“Many colleagues hide mistakes instead of reporting them. It feels safer that way.”*

23

384

Table 4.2: Team-Level Silence Mechanisms

Type of Silence	Trigger	Participant Quote
Acquiescent	Fear of retaliation	"We don't share ideas unless asked."
Defensive	Job insecurity	"Many colleagues hide mistakes instead of reporting them."
Prosocial	Protecting colleagues	"We cover for each other to avoid manager criticism."

385

386

387

388 4.3.2 Favoritism and Peer Competition

389 Toxic leaders often favor certain team members, creating competitive and mistrustful climates. Employees reported
390 rivalry, decreased collaboration, and selective communication.

- 391 • P9 (RMG, Female, 29): "Only a few employees receive praise. Others are ignored or blamed, which creates
392 tension in the team."
- 393 • P18 (Telecom, Male, 36): "We compete for recognition because the leader's favoritism is obvious."

7

394 These findings align with Einarsen et al.'s (2007) conceptualization of team-level dysfunction under destructive
395 leadership.

396 4.3.3 Team Trust Erosion and Conformity

397 The combination of fear and favoritism erodes trust, leading to conformity. Teams avoid dissenting opinions to
398 prevent punishment, reducing problem-solving capacity and innovation.

399 **Figure 4.2: Team-Level Dynamics Under Toxic Leadership**

400 *Favoritism & Fear → Reduced Trust → Conformity & Silence → Low Collaboration*

401

402 4.4 Organizational-Level Mechanisms: Structural Reinforcement of Toxic Leadership

403 At the organizational level, structural and cultural factors reinforce toxic leadership behaviors.

404 **4.4.1 Weak HR Policies and Lack of Accountability**

405 Participants reported that HR departments **rarely intervene**, even when complaints were lodged. Document analysis
 406 confirmed limited whistleblowing protection and punitive organizational policies.

- 407 • P20 (Banking, Female, 33): *"Even after complaining, nothing changes. HR often sides with the manager."*

408 **Table 4.3: Organizational-Level Reinforcement Mechanisms**

Mechanism	Description	Example Quote	Reference
Weak HR policies	Lack of enforcement of complaints	"HR sides with the manager"	Schmidt, 2008
Punitive culture	Mistakes punished rather than addressed	"Mistakes are publicly criticized"	Lipman-Blumen, 2005
Hierarchical rigidity	Limited upward communication	"We cannot approach higher management"	Morrison & Milliken, 2000

409

410 **4.4.2 Cultural Norms and Acceptance of Toxicity**

411 Cultural expectations in hierarchical workplaces contribute to acceptance of toxic behaviors. Employees perceive
 412 abusive behaviors as normal or unavoidable, further embedding fear and silence.

- 413 • P11 (RMG, Female, 25): *"It's common for supervisors to shout or criticize. Everyone accepts it as normal."*
- 414 • P28 (Telecom, Male, 41): *"Challenging a senior is considered disrespectful, even if their behavior is unfair."*

415 **4.4.3 Organizational Dysfunction**

416 Combined individual and team-level effects manifest as organizational dysfunction, including:

- 417 • Reduced innovation and creativity
- 418 • Increased absenteeism and turnover
- 419 • Ethical compromise and stagnation

420 **Figure 4.3: Multilevel Impacts of Toxic Leadership**

421 **Leader Dark Traits**



423 **Individual: Fear, Burnout**



425 **Team: Silence, Conformity**



427 **Organization: Dysfunction, Low Innovation**



429 **Overall Reduced Psychological Safety**

430

35 431 **4.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework**

432 Based on the findings, a multilevel framework of toxic leadership mechanisms is proposed, integrating individual,
433 team, and organizational effects:

434 **Figure 4.4: Multilevel Mechanisms of Toxic Leadership**

435 ***Leader Dark Traits***



437 ***Individual-Level Mechanisms: Fear, Identity Threat, Burnout***



439 ***Team-Level Mechanisms: Silence, Conformity, Trust Erosion***



441 ***Organizational-Level Mechanisms: Weak HR, Punitive Culture, Hierarchical Norms***



443 ***Outcome: Reduced Psychological Safety, Low Engagement, Dysfunction***

444

445 **4.6 Summary of Key Findings**

446

Table 4.4: Summary of Findings Across Levels

Level	Key Mechanisms	Outcome	Participant Quote
Individual	Fear of retaliation, identity threat, burnout	Stress, disengagement	"I never question my manager..."
Team	Employee silence, favoritism, conformity	Low collaboration, mistrust	"We compete for recognition..."
Organizational	Weak HR, punitive culture, hierarchical rigidity	Reduced innovation, turnover	"Even after complaining, nothing changes..."

447

448 Key Insights:

- 449
- 450 • Toxic leaders employ subtle psychological and structural mechanisms that are often hidden.
 - 451 • Individual-level fear translates into team-level silence and conformity, which, combined with organizational enablers, reduces psychological safety.
 - 452 • Multilevel interventions are required to address leader behavior, team norms, and organizational structures
 - 453 simultaneously.

454 5. Discussions, Analysis, Findings, and Solutions**455 5.1 Introduction**

456 This chapter discusses the findings from Chapter 4, providing in-depth analysis and linking empirical results to the
 457 literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The chapter focuses on understanding how toxic leadership manifests across
 458 individual, team, and organizational levels, creating fear, silence, and reduced psychological safety. In addition,
 459 practical solutions and interventions are proposed to mitigate these effects and foster a psychologically safe work
 460 environment.

461 The discussion is organized into four sections:

- 462 1) Individual-Level Findings
- 463 2) Team-Level Findings
- 464 3) Organizational-Level Findings
- 465 4) Practical Solutions and Recommendations

466 5.2 Individual-Level Findings and Discussion**467 5.2.1 Fear and Anxiety**

30

468 Consistent with the literature, participants reported that leaders with dark traits—particularly narcissism,
469 Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—instilled fear and anxiety, leading to self-censorship and hypervigilance
470 (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Tepper, 2000).

- 471 • Fear acts as a psychological control mechanism: employees avoid expressing dissent, reduce risk-taking, and
472 defer decision-making.
- 473 • Anxiety and stress contribute to emotional exhaustion, corroborating findings by Schmidt (2008) on burnout
474 under toxic leadership.

475 **Analysis:**

476 Fear and anxiety serve as primary mechanisms through which dark traits suppress psychological safety. The
477 phenomenological data indicate that even subtle behaviors—such as sarcastic comments or unpredictable punitive
478 responses—have a cumulative effect on employee wellbeing.

479 **Implications:**

- 480 • Leaders' dark traits directly influence the cognitive and emotional state of employees, limiting creativity and
481 engagement.
- 482 • Interventions such as coaching for emotional intelligence and stress management can reduce these individual-
483 level impacts.

484 **5.2.2 Identity Threat and Undermining**

485 Participants experienced identity threat, where leaders undermined professional confidence through criticism,
486 favoritism, and public humiliation (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

- 487 • Employees internalized these behaviors, leading to decreased self-esteem and impaired work performance.
- 488 • Narcissistic leaders often framed feedback in a way that reinforced their own superiority, consistent with
489 Einarsen et al.'s (2007) conceptualization of destructive leadership.

490 **Analysis:**

491 Identity threats act as a psychological lever, maintaining leader authority and discouraging opposition. Employees
492 adapt by becoming passive or overly cautious, reducing individual initiative.

493 **Implications:**

- 494 • Employee support systems, such as mentoring or peer networks, may buffer identity threat and improve
495 resilience.
- 496 • Training leaders to provide constructive feedback can mitigate identity-related harm.

497 *5.2.3 Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout*

498 Emotional exhaustion emerged as a significant consequence of persistent exposure to toxic behaviors. Participants
499 reported fatigue, disengagement, and reduced motivation.

- 500 • Burnout aligns with prior research indicating that abusive supervision and psychopathy lead to psychological
501 strain (Tepper, 2000; Babiak & Hare, 2006).

502 **Analysis:**

503 Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between leader dark traits and psychological safety, as exhausted
504 employees are less likely to engage, voice concerns, or participate in team problem-solving.

505

506 **Implications:**

- 507 • Organizations should monitor workload and stress levels, implementing wellbeing programs to reduce burnout.
508 • Psychological interventions such as resilience training and counseling may alleviate exhaustion and restore
509 engagement.

510 *5.3 Team-Level Findings and Discussion*

511 *5.3.1 Employee Silence*

512 The study identified acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial silence as pervasive mechanisms through which teams
513 respond to toxic leadership (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Dyne et al., 2003).

- 514 • Employees withheld information or avoided participation to prevent negative consequences, which hindered
515 problem-solving and innovation.
- 516 • Defensive silence was the most common form, as fear of retaliation constrained communication.

517 **Analysis:**

518 Employee silence acts as a multilevel transmission mechanism: individual fear translates into team-level conformity,
519 reducing collaboration and reinforcing toxic leader dominance.

520 **Implications:**

- 521 • Encouraging structured opportunities for anonymous feedback can reduce fear-driven silence.
- 522 • Training managers in participative leadership can break the silence-feedback cycle.

523 *5.3.2 Favoritism and Conformity*

524 Favoritism reinforced inequality and competition among team members, resulting in distrust and reduced
525 cohesion(Einarsen et al., 2007).

- 526 • Team members conformed to avoid conflict, suppressing innovative ideas.
- 527 • Observations confirmed that favoritism undermined psychological safety, consistent with the theoretical
528 framework in Chapter 2.

529 **Analysis:**

530 Favoritism and conformity are socially enforced mechanisms, whereby team members internalize norms of silence
531 and compliance. Toxic leaders exploit these norms to maintain authority.

532 **Implications:**

- 533 • Transparent performance appraisal systems can reduce favoritism.
- 534 • Team-building and trust-enhancement exercises may counteract conformity and encourage collaboration.

535 *5.3.3 Trust Erosion*

536 Trust erosion emerged as a central theme, connecting individual fear to team dysfunction.

- 537 • Teams reported reduced communication and collaboration, as members feared misrepresentation or punishment.
- 538 • Peer-to-peer distrust further reinforced organizational silos.

539 **Analysis:**

540 Trust erosion amplifies the impact of individual-level fear, creating a feedback loop that perpetuates toxic leadership
541 effects across multiple levels.

542 **Implications:**

- 543 • Interventions should target both leader behavior and team norms.
- 544 • Leadership development programs emphasizing ethical behavior and relational transparency can restore trust.

545 **5.4 Organizational-Level Findings and Discussion**

546 **5.4.1 Weak HR Policies and Lack of Accountability**

547 Organizational systems often enabled toxic leadership, with limited mechanisms for complaint, whistleblowing, or
548 corrective action (Schmidt, 2008).

- 549 • HR departments frequently failed to intervene, leaving employees vulnerable.
550 • Organizational hierarchy and rigid culture exacerbated the effects of toxic leadership.

551 **Analysis:**

552 At the organizational level, structural deficiencies reinforce individual and team-level dysfunction, creating a self-
553 perpetuating cycle of fear, silence, and low psychological safety.

554

555

556 **Implications:**

- 557 • Organizations must implement robust accountability frameworks, clear grievance procedures, and proactive HR
558 interventions.
559 • Policy reform can address systemic enablers of toxic leadership.

560 **5.4.2 Punitive Culture and Hierarchical Norms**

561 Hierarchical rigidity and punitive culture contributed to norms of compliance and fear, as challenging authority was
562 discouraged.

- 563 • Employees internalized these norms, accepting toxic behaviors as part of organizational culture.
564 • Observational data confirmed that hierarchical enforcement restricted upward communication.

565 **Analysis:**

566 Organizational culture can legitimize toxic leadership, making interventions at the individual or team level
567 insufficient without systemic change.

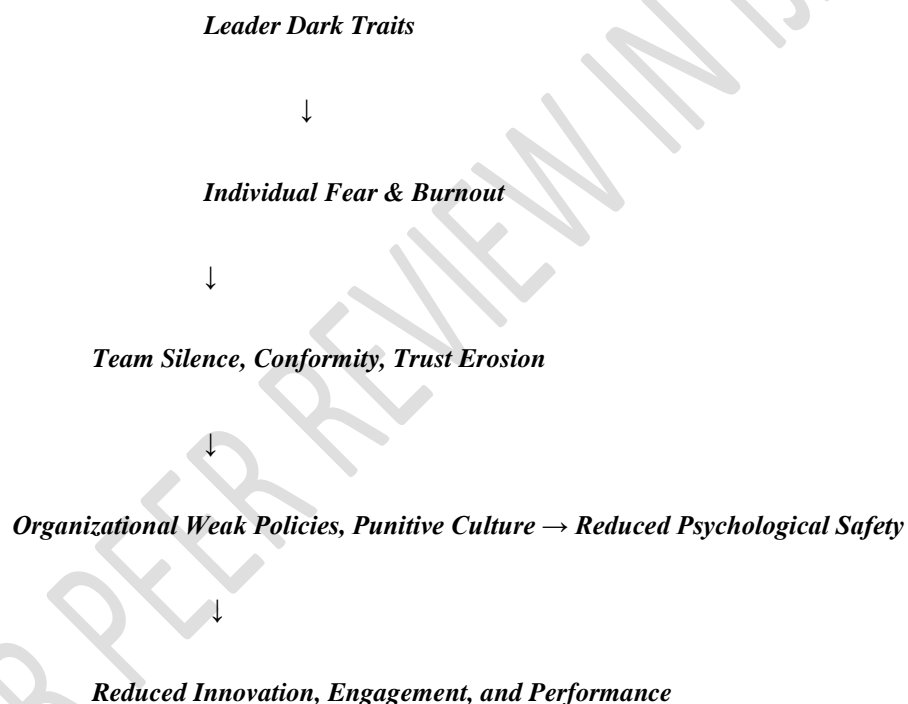
568 **Implications:**

- 569 • Promoting a culture of psychological safety requires top-down commitment and leadership accountability at all
570 levels.
- 571 • Culture change initiatives should integrate ethical leadership, transparency, and employee voice mechanisms.

572 *5.5 Integrated Analysis Across Levels*

573 The study demonstrates that toxic leadership operates as a **multilevel phenomenon**, with mechanisms that interact
574 across individual, team, and organizational layers.

575 **Figure 5.1: Integrated Multilevel Model of Toxic Leadership Mechanisms**



585 **Key Insights:**

- 586 • Fear and identity threat at the individual level drive team silence and conformity.
- 587 • Team-level dysfunction amplifies psychological risk and reduces collaboration.
- 588 • Organizational enablers such as weak HR and punitive norms sustain toxic leadership.
- 589 • Interventions must be multilevel, addressing leaders, teams, and organizational structures simultaneously.

590 *5.6 Practical Solutions and Recommendations*

591 *5.6.1 Leader-Focused Interventions*

- 592 • **Leadership Training and Coaching:** Develop self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-
- 593 making skills.
- 594 • **360-Degree Feedback:** Incorporate upward and peer feedback to identify and correct toxic behaviors.
- 595 • **Accountability Mechanisms:** Link performance evaluations to ethical and supportive leadership behaviors.

596 **5.6.2 Team-Level Interventions**

- 597 • **Team Building and Trust Enhancement:** Strengthen collaboration and reduce conformity through structured
- 598 activities.
- 599 • **Open Communication Channels:** Facilitate anonymous feedback mechanisms to encourage speaking up.
- 600 • **Peer Support Networks:** Provide support systems to buffer stress and identity threat.

601 **5.6.3 Organizational-Level Interventions**

- 602 • **Policy Reforms:** Develop clear grievance procedures, whistleblower protections, and anti-retaliation policies.
- 603 • **Cultural Change Initiatives:** Promote transparency, ethical behavior, and employee voice across hierarchies.
- 604 • **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement continuous monitoring of leadership practices and organizational
- 605 climate.

606 **Table 5.1: Multilevel Solutions to Toxic Leadership**

Level	Intervention	Expected Outcome
Individual	Leadership coaching	Reduced fear, improved emotional regulation
Team	Open communication and trust-building	Increased collaboration, reduced silence
Organizational	Policy reforms and culture change	Enhanced psychological safety, reduced turnover

607

608 **5.7 Theoretical Implications**

- 609 • Confirms the **multilevel nature of toxic leadership**, extending prior research (Einarsen et al., 2007; Morrison
- 610 & Milliken, 2000).
- 611 • Highlights the **mechanisms of fear, silence, and psychological safety reduction**, connecting leader dark traits
- 612 to organizational dysfunction.
- 613 • Offers an **integrated framework** for future research on interventions that target individual, team, and
- 614 organizational levels simultaneously.

615 5.8 Practical Implications

- 616 • Organizations must adopt a systemic approach to address toxic leadership, combining HR policy reform,
617 leadership development, and team interventions.
- 618 • Employees should be provided with psychological support and resilience programs to mitigate individual-level
619 impacts.
- 620 • Cultural transformation is crucial to normalize ethical leadership and employee voice.

621 5.9 Limitations of the Findings

- 622 • The study is context-specific to Bangladesh; cross-cultural applicability may be limited.
- 1 623 • Data relied primarily on self-reports, which may be subject to social desirability or recall bias.
- 624 • Organizational document analysis was limited due to confidentiality constraints.

13 625 Despite these limitations, the study provides rich, multilevel insights into toxic leadership mechanisms.

626

627

628 5.10 Summary

629 This chapter analyzed findings from Chapter 4, integrating them with existing literature and highlighting multilevel
630 mechanisms of toxic leadership. Individual fear, team-level silence and conformity, and organizational enablers
631 collectively reduce psychological safety and organizational performance. Practical solutions at all three levels were
632 proposed to mitigate toxic leadership and foster psychologically safe work environments.

21 633 6. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Future Research

634 6.1 Introduction

635 This chapter concludes the study on “The Hidden Mechanisms of Toxic Leadership: A Multilevel Analysis of How
636 Leader Dark Traits Create Fear, Silence, and Reduced Psychological Safety in Organizations.” The study explored
637 the complex, multilevel mechanisms through which toxic leadership affects individuals, teams, and organizations in
638 Bangladesh. Drawing from qualitative data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the
31 639 study provides insights into the pathways linking leader dark traits—such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and
640 psychopathy—to fear, silence, and diminished psychological safety.

641 The chapter is structured into four sections:

- 12 642 1) Summary of the Study
- 643 2) Key Findings and Theoretical Contributions
- 644 3) Practical Recommendations
- 24 645 4) Limitations and Directions for Future Research

646 6.2 Summary of the Study

647 The primary aim of this study was to investigate how toxic leadership operates across multiple levels of
648 organizations, the mechanisms through which fear and silence emerge, and the consequences for psychological
2 649 safety. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design with a purposive sample of 30 employees across
650 the banking, RMG, education, and telecommunications sectors in Bangladesh.

- 27 651 • **Chapter 1** outlined the background, research problem, objectives, and significance of the study.
- 652 • **Chapter 2** provided a literature review, examining leadership theories, dark traits, toxic leadership dimensions,
653 psychological safety, employee silence, and multilevel organizational impacts.
- 3 654 • **Chapter 3** described the research methodology, detailing the sample, data collection procedures, research
655 instruments, ethical considerations, and data analysis using thematic analysis.
- 656 • **Chapter 4** presented the findings, identifying individual, team, and organizational-level mechanisms through
657 which toxic leadership affects employees and organizations.
- 43 658 • **Chapter 5** discussed the findings in relation to the literature, highlighted multilevel mechanisms, and proposed
659 practical interventions to mitigate toxic leadership effects.

660 The study's multilevel approach fills a critical gap in the literature by integrating individual, team, and
661 organizational perspectives on toxic leadership, particularly within the context of Bangladeshi workplaces.

662 6.3 Key Findings and Theoretical Contributions

663 6.3.1 Individual-Level Findings

- 664 • **Fear and Anxiety:** Leaders' dark traits induced fear of retaliation, job insecurity, and hypervigilance among
665 employees.
- 666 • **Identity Threat:** Narcissistic and abusive behaviors undermined employees' self-esteem and professional
667 identity.
- 668 • **Emotional Exhaustion:** Persistent exposure to toxic behaviors led to burnout, reduced motivation, and
669 disengagement.

670 **Theoretical Contribution:** These findings support and extend prior research on abusive supervision, the Dark
671 Triad, and psychological safety (Tepper, 2000; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), highlighting
672 fear and identity threat as key mediating mechanisms between leader traits and psychological safety reduction.

673 **6.3.2 Team-Level Findings**

- 674 • **Employee Silence:** Teams practiced acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial silence to avoid punishment or
675 protect colleagues.
- 676 • **Favoritism and Conformity:** Leaders' preferential treatment created competition, reduced cohesion, and
677 reinforced conformity.
- 678 • **Trust Erosion:** Distrust among team members limited collaboration and information sharing.

679 **Theoretical Contribution:** Team-level dysfunction demonstrates how individual-level fear translates into collective
680 silence and conformity, aligning with Morrison & Milliken's (2000) conceptualization of organizational silence.

681 **6.3.3 Organizational-Level Findings**

- 682 • **Weak HR Policies:** Lack of effective grievance mechanisms allowed toxic leadership behaviors to persist.
- 683 • **Punitive Culture and Hierarchical Rigidity:** Organizational norms reinforced fear, discouraging upward
684 communication and employee voice.
- 685 • **Reduced Innovation and Engagement:** Multilevel effects led to decreased creativity, high turnover, and
686 organizational dysfunction.

687 **Theoretical Contribution:** The findings support the notion that toxic leadership is embedded within organizational
688 structures and culture, emphasizing the need for systemic interventions beyond individual or team-focused solutions
689 (Einarsen et al., 2007; Schmidt, 2008).

690 **6.3.4 Integrated Multilevel Model**

691 The study proposes a conceptual framework integrating individual, team, and organizational mechanisms:

692 **Figure 6.1: Integrated Multilevel Model of Toxic Leadership Mechanisms**

693 **Leader Dark Traits**



695 **Individual-Level: Fear, Identity Threat, Burnout**



697 **Team-Level: Silence, Conformity, Trust Erosion**



699 **Organizational-Level: Weak HR, Punitive Culture, Hierarchical Norms**

700



701

Outcome: Reduced Psychological Safety, Low Engagement, Dysfunction

702

Contribution to Theory: This model bridges gaps in previous literature by demonstrating how dark leader traits propagate through multilevel mechanisms, ultimately affecting organizational outcomes. It provides a practical and theoretical lens for understanding and addressing toxic leadership in non-Western contexts.

705

6.4 Practical Recommendations

706

6.4.1 Individual-Level Interventions

707

- **Leadership Training and Coaching:** Enhance self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making.

708

709

- **Psychological Support Programs:** Counseling, resilience training, and stress management programs to mitigate fear and burnout.

710

711

- **360-Degree Feedback:** Provide leaders with structured feedback from subordinates, peers, and superiors to identify and correct toxic behaviors.

712

713

714

6.4.2 Team-Level Interventions

715

- **Open Communication Channels:** Establish anonymous feedback systems to encourage speaking up without fear of retaliation.

716

717

- **Trust-Building Activities:** Team-building workshops to foster collaboration and reduce conformity.

718

- **Peer Support Networks:** Create mentoring or buddy systems to buffer identity threats and promote psychological safety.

719

720

6.4.3 Organizational-Level Interventions

721

- **Policy Reforms:** Strengthen grievance mechanisms, anti-retaliation policies, and whistleblower protections.

722

- **Cultural Change Initiatives:** Promote ethical leadership, transparency, and inclusivity.

723

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuous assessment of leadership behavior and organizational climate to prevent the recurrence of toxic practices.

724

725

Table 6.1: Multilevel Solutions to Toxic Leadership

Level	Intervention	Expected Outcome
Individual	Leadership coaching & counseling	Reduced fear, improved resilience

Team	Trust-building & open communication	Enhanced collaboration, reduced silence
Organization	Policy reforms & cultural transformation	Increased psychological safety, reduced turnover

726

727 **6.5 Implications for Practice**

5

- 728 • **Human Resource Management:** HR departments must proactively monitor leadership behaviors and
729 implement accountability mechanisms.
- 730 • **Leadership Development:** Organizations should prioritize ethical leadership and emotional intelligence in
731 selection and promotion processes.
- 732 • **Organizational Culture:** Psychological safety should be embedded as a core value, with explicit
733 encouragement for employee voice and participation.

734 These implications suggest that effective mitigation of toxic leadership requires a multilevel strategy, addressing
735 leader behavior, team dynamics, and organizational structures simultaneously.

736

34

737 **6.6 Limitations of the Study**

- 738 • **Contextual Limitation:** The study is limited to organizations in Bangladesh, which may reduce generalizability
739 to other cultural or geographic contexts.
- 740 • **Sample Size:** While qualitative depth was achieved, a sample of 30 participants limits statistical generalization.
- 741 • **Self-Report Bias:** Participant accounts may reflect social desirability or recall bias.
- 742 • **Document Access:** Access to confidential organizational documents was restricted, limiting full analysis of
743 policy effectiveness.

744 **6.7 Directions for Future Research**

- 745 • **Cross-Cultural Studies:** Examine toxic leadership mechanisms across diverse cultural contexts to test the
746 applicability of the multilevel model.
- 747 • **Quantitative Validation:** Develop and test scales measuring multilevel effects of toxic leadership to generalize
748 findings.
- 749 • **Longitudinal Research:** Explore long-term impacts of toxic leadership on psychological safety, team
750 performance, and organizational outcomes.
- 751 • **Intervention Studies:** Assess the effectiveness of multilevel interventions in mitigating toxic leadership effects.

752 **6.8 Conclusion**

753 This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how leader dark traits operate across multiple levels to create
754 fear, silence, and reduced psychological safety. By integrating individual, team, and organizational perspectives, the
755 study highlights the complex, interdependent mechanisms that perpetuate toxic leadership.

756 **Key Takeaways:**

- 757 • **Multilevel Mechanisms:** Toxic leadership effects are propagated through fear and burnout (individual), silence
758 and conformity (team), and weak policies and punitive culture (organization).
- 759 • **Psychological Safety:** Reduced psychological safety is a central outcome of toxic leadership, negatively
760 impacting engagement, innovation, and performance.
- 761 • **Intervention Imperative:** Mitigating toxic leadership requires coordinated interventions at all three levels,
762 including leadership development, team-based strategies, and organizational reforms.

763 The findings contribute both theoretically and practically, offering a robust framework for understanding and
764 addressing toxic leadership in organizational contexts, particularly in non-Western workplaces such as Bangladesh.

765

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