

Silent Sabotage: The Role of Dark Triad Leadership in Employee Turnover and HR Dysfunction

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Abstract

Dark triad leadership is an invisible, internal danger that affects employees' health and employee turnover and deteriorates HR systems. These leaders, known as narcissistic, machiavellian, and psychopathic, erect an atmosphere of fear, manipulation, emotional fatigue, and moral decay. Leadership is one of the most important factors affecting an organization's success, employee satisfaction, and workplace stability. But not all leadership is beneficial. Dark triad leadership has become a growing area of academic research, but several important gaps remain. First, most studies examining the dark triad traits have done so separately and have not investigated the overall organizational effect of the dark triad. Second, HR dysfunction is an enabling mechanism that receives insufficient attention in the literature, which focuses more on employee psychological distress. A recent systematic review concluded that more research is needed on the moderators and mediators of organizational outcomes in dark triad leadership. The present study uses a quantitative explanatory research design. The objective measurement of relationships among variables is based on positivist philosophy. The research methodology adopted in the study is a deductive approach grounded in theories of organizational behavior. The targeted audience is: employees, HR professionals, mid-level staff, and private and public sector workers. There will be about 300 respondents. Stratified random sampling will be used. Structured questionnaires will be used with a five-point Likert scale to collect primary data. Academic journals, organizational reports, leadership studies, HR literature, and data analysis will be used as secondary data.

Keywords: Dark Triad, Toxic Leadership, Employee Turnover, HR Dysfunction, Narcissism, Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, Organizational Behavior, Workplace Toxicity.

Introduction

Leadership is one of the most important factors affecting an organization's success, employee satisfaction, and workplace stability. But not all leadership is beneficial. In many organizations, staff members fall victim to poor management, which harms morale, mental health, and trust. This kind of behavior has become associated with the psychological concept known as the dark triad. The dark triad consists of narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy, which are related to

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exploitation, manipulation, lack of empathy, strategic deception, and self-centered behaviors of leadership. People with such attributes may be charming and assertive in recruitment and promotion, but they may have a negative long-term influence on the organization. However, recent studies in the workplace indicate that people with dark personality traits are more likely to pursue leadership roles, as these roles offer opportunities for control, recognition, and authority (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Spain et al., 2014; O'Boyle et al., 2012)

The challenge intensifies when HR departments are unaware of, or unable to control, toxic leadership behaviors. A lack of accountability, fear cultures, or organizational politics can inadvertently shield destructive leaders through dysfunctional HR systems. Consequently, high-quality workers leave the organization, whilst toxic leaders remain. The study on the relationship of dark triad leadership with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and turnover intention among 282 hotel employees suggests that dark triad leadership is a significant predictor of these outcomes. Likewise, systematic reviews have validated that dark triad leadership can also lead to abusive leadership, bullying, emotional exhaustion, and counterproductive workplace behavior. The purpose of this article is to examine how dark triad leadership contributes to employee turnover and HR dysfunction through an integrated organizational mechanism (Tepper, 2000; Schyns & Schilling, 2013)

Research Problem

Studies and reports indicate that some organizations place a high emphasis on productivity and profits while neglecting the psychological effects of toxic leadership on their workers. Leaders with dark triad characteristics might seem effective at first because of their confidence and decisiveness, but eventually lead to workplace fear, burnout, reduced trust, ethical deterioration, and employee resignation. To date, the questions of toxic leadership and turnover have been studied separately; however, only a few studies have integrated the two within a single context (Einarsen et al., 2007; Krasikova et al., 2013)

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How does a dark triad leader affect employees' turnover and HR dysfunction?

Sub-Questions

1. Narcissistic leadership negatively impacts employee commitment and morale.
2. How is machiavellian leadership involved in psychological insecurity in the workplace?
3. How is it that psychopathic leaders cause burnout and emotional exhaustion?
4. How does HR dysfunction help to facilitate toxic leadership behavior?
5. What factors are in between dark triad leadership and turnover intention?
6. How can toxic leadership outcomes be minimized through preventive HR strategies?

Research Gap

Dark triad leadership has become a growing area of academic research, but several important research gaps remain. First, most studies examining the dark triad traits have done so separately and have not investigated the overall organizational effect of the dark triad. Second, HR dysfunction is an enabling mechanism that receives insufficient attention in the literature, which focuses more on employee psychological distress. A recent systematic review concluded that more research is needed on the moderators and mediators of organizational outcomes in dark triad

leadership. Other gaps include limited integration of HR dysfunction into toxic leadership models, a lack of qualitative evidence on employees' lived experiences, insufficient focus on developing countries, and limited research on organizational accountability systems. Little research has been conducted on preventative HR structures. In this article, we aim to tackle these gaps by weaving leadership toxicity, employee turnover, and HR dysfunction into a single organizational analysis (Bueno-de la Fuente et al., 2025).

Hypotheses Development

H1: Dark triad leadership is positively related to employee turnover intention.

Discussion: Dark triad leaders often make work environments unsafe by manipulating, intimidating, and exploiting employees. Social exchange theory holds that workers feel entitled to fairness and respect in return for their commitment and performance. The psychological contract is violated by toxic leadership, and employees feel they are psychologically withdrawn from the organization. Toxic supervision is consistently found to be a strong predictor of turnover intention, as workers try to escape from an abusive work environment. This correlation is further reinforced by emotional exhaustion and distrust at work.

H2: Narcissistic leadership has a negative impact on organizational commitment.

Discussion: Narcissistic leaders focus more on their own image, recognition, and authority, and not more on the welfare of the organization. They tend to attribute success to their employees, blame others for failure, inhibit staff voice, and crave attention. Workers under narcissistic bosses often experience a lack of being appreciated and of feeling emotionally connected to the organization's mission. As time went on, trust and emotional attachment eroded, reducing organizational commitment.

H3: Machiavellian leadership is positively related to psychological insecurity in the workplace.

Discussion: Machiavellian leaders resort to strategic manipulation, deception, and political behavior to maintain control. They typically foster a workplace atmosphere of fear, distrust, and a lack of goodwill. Psychological insecurity arises when workers do not feel secure voicing concerns, ideas, and disagreements. This lack of security affects collaboration, innovation, and trust among team members.

H4: Psychopathic leadership has a significant impact on increased employee burnout.

Discussion: Psychopathic leaders are characterized by emotionlessness, impulsiveness, aggression, and lack of empathy. These leaders are often unaware of the harmful implications of allowing abusive behavior and undue pressure without regard for the well-being of their employees. The job demands-resources theory states that when emotional stress persists for an extended period and there is insufficient support, burnout is likely to occur. People who have been subjected to psychopathic supervision tend to suffer from emotional exhaustion, anxiety, sleep disturbances, mental fatigue, and psychological distress.

H5: The relationship between dark triad leadership and employee turnover is hypothesized to be mediated by HR dysfunction.

Discussion: HR dysfunction aggravates the impact of toxic leadership because they are unable to safeguard employees or hold them accountable. As complaints are ignored, toxic leaders are protected, reporting systems are weak, and HR is non-independent, employees begin to consider

resigning. Therefore, HR dysfunction serves as a mediating organizational mechanism to enhance turnover intention in the context of dark triad leadership.

H6: Psychological safety will moderate the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention.

Discussion: Psychological safety is when employees feel they can raise concerns and ideas without facing a negative consequence. In groups with high levels of psychological safety, toxic leadership can have negative consequences, which can be mitigated with support systems and communication channels.

Literature Review

Concept of the dark triad: Paulhus and Williams (2002) introduced the term "dark triad" to describe three socially negative personality traits: narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy, which are related to manipulation and unethical behavior. Dark triad personalities have been found to be significantly related to counterproductive workplace behavior, abusive supervision, and unethical decision-making in a major review on workplace behavior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Narcissistic leadership: Narcissistic leaders have a high sense of self-importance, a high need for admiration, and low empathy. At first, they can seem visionary and charismatic, but over time, they tend to be more defensive and exploitative. Studies have shown that narcissistic leaders attribute success to their staff, discourage employee criticism, foster unhealthy work environments, and hurt employee morale. Research among senior managers revealed that the narcissistic personality has a significant impact on organizational culture and employees' commitment (Grijalva et al., 2015; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

Machiavellian leadership: A manipulator, a political ruler, and a self-serving one of the Machiavellian type. Often rely on manipulation and emotional manipulation to retain control. A systematic review found that the typical machiavellian leader tends to exploit and manipulate others psychologically. Some of the employees' psychological reactions to machiavellian leadership are: psychological insecurity, distrust, fear of retaliation, and reduced organizational commitment (Christie & Geis, 1970; Dahling et al., 2009).

Psychopathic leadership: Leaders who are psychopathic are emotionally detached, impulsive, aggressive, and have no remorse. It has been suggested that psychopathic leaders establish a climate within organizations that instills fear and leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout in employees. These leaders often intimidate employees, ignore ethical standards, normalize abusive behavior, or create toxic competition (Babiak et al., 2010; Boddy, 2011).

Dark triad leadership and employee turnover: Employee turnover is a major concern for many companies. One of the biggest concerns that many companies have is employee turnover. One of the worst consequences of "bad" leadership is high employee turnover. The study using the sample of hotel employees in South Korea showed that narcissism and machiavellianism are significant factors leading to emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. Another study with 235 employees found that emotional intelligence (as well as workplace stress) serves as a mediating factor between the dark triad traits and the intention to leave the organization. Burnout, emotional exhaustion, workplace bullying, fear-based supervision, and psychological contract violation are all factors of increased turnover under dark triad leadership. Research based on social exchange theory indicates

that toxic leaders negatively affect reciprocal trust between employees and organizations (Baheer et al., 2023; Tett & Meyer, 1993).

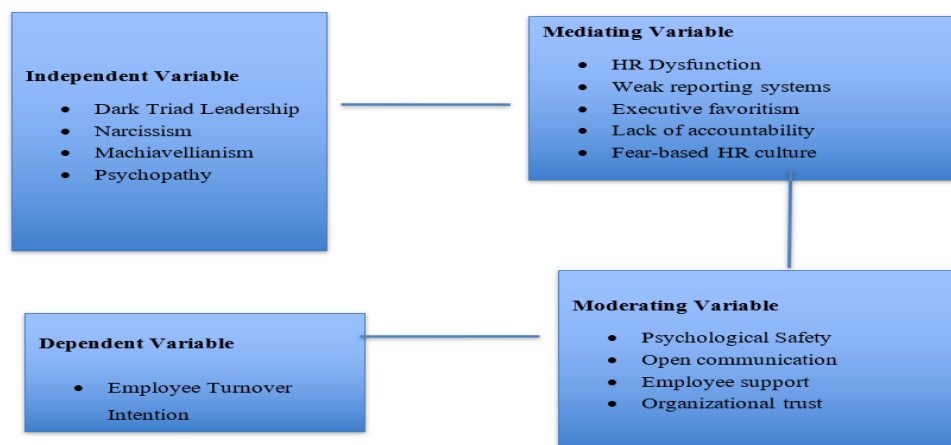
HR dysfunction and toxic leadership: HR's job is to make sure that it is fair and employees are protected within the organization. But HR systems tend to go awry when toxic leaders wield political or executive power. Typical HR breakdowns include: ignoring employee complaints, protecting executives, weak accountability systems, a fear-based reporting culture, and manipulated performance evaluations. Based on the research, organizations with weak accountability systems should be aware that a personality with manipulative traits may be perceived as decisive and charismatic when choosing leaders, even unintentionally (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2017).

Employee experiences under dark triad leaders: The majority of employees have positive working experiences at their workplace under dark triad leaders. Bad leadership – serious psychological effects documented by qualitative employee accounts. Leaders' forum participants talk about incidents with gaslighting, public humiliation, blame-shifting, emotional manipulation, and denial of previous instructions. One staff member shared that he kept getting blamed by his managers for their failures, and another employee said that he was systematically psychologically intimidated by a toxic executive. All of these experiences are examples of how toxic leadership can subtly impact employee mental health and organizational trust.

Theoretical Framework

Social exchange theory: The social exchange theory is the theory that describes relationships at work in terms of the mutual commitments between people and organizations. Dark triad leaders break these reciprocal expectations through exploitation, manipulation, and emotional abuse. As a result, employees psychologically leave and begin to show turnover intentions (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Job demands-resources theory: The JD-R Theory helps to explain how burnout can occur when someone feels overcharged and under-supported. Dark triad leaders raise emotional demands, psychological stress, fear-based supervision, and lower emotional support, organizational trust, and psychological safety. This imbalance can lead to increased burnout and turnover. The following explains the study's conceptual framework (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Research Methodology

The present study uses quantitative explanatory research design. The objective measurement of relationships among variables is based on positivist philosophy. The research methodology adopted in the study is deductive approach, which is based on the theories of organizational behavior. The targeted audience are: employees, HR professionals, mid-level staff, private and public sector workers. There will be about 300 respondents. Stratified random sampling will be used. Structured questionnaires will be used with a five point likert scale to collect primary data. Academic journals, organizational reports, leadership studies, HR literature, data analysis will be used as secondary data. The data collected is analyzed using SPSS, AMOS Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Findings and Discussion

Statistical findings and data analysis is as follows.

Descriptive Statistics

The study collected responses from 350 employees working in public and private sector organizations.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	189	54%
	Female	161	46%
Sector	Private	228	65%
	Public	122	35%
Age Group	20–30 Years	158	45%
	31–40 Years	123	35%
	41–50 Years	52	15%
	51+ Years	17	5%

The majority of respondents belonged to the private sector, suggesting greater exposure to competitive organizational environments and performance-driven leadership structures.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Narcissistic Leadership	3.61	0.82
Machiavellian Leadership	3.74	0.79
Psychopathic Leadership	3.48	0.88
HR Dysfunction	3.69	0.76
Psychological Safety	2.31	0.91
Employee Burnout	3.83	0.71
Organizational Commitment	2.42	0.84
Psychological Insecurity	3.79	0.80
Turnover Intention	3.91	0.77

Interpretation: Results showed relatively high mean scores for the Machiavellian leadership ($M = 3.74$) and intention to leave ($M = 3.91$) which indicated that employees strongly perceived manipulative leadership behaviors and had a strong intention to quit their organizations. Employee burnout also had a high mean score ($M = 3.83$), which reflects the significant emotional depletion of the employees who experienced toxic leadership. On the other hand, the scores of psychological safety ($M = 2.31$) and organizational commitment ($M = 2.42$) were relatively low, reflecting a lack of trust and emotional commitment to the organization.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Dark Triad Leadership	12	0.91
HR Dysfunction	6	0.87
Psychological Safety	5	0.84
Burnout	5	0.89
Organizational Commitment	5	0.86
Turnover Intention	4	0.90

Interpretation: All the variables had Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70, which is the accepted level for internal consistency and reliability of measurement scales. The dark triad leadership construct showed the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), demonstrating consistency in terms of the narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy dimensions.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Dark Triad Leadership	1				
2. HR Dysfunction	.71**	1			
3. Burnout	.76**	.68**	1		
4. Psychological Safety	-.63**	-.59**	-.66**	1	
5. Turnover Intention	.81**	.73**	.78**	-.69**	1

$p < 0.01$

Interpretation: This correlation analysis indicates a high positive correlation between dark triad leadership and turnover intention ($r = .81$, $p < 0.01$), justifying the claim that toxic leadership can contribute to higher turnover intentions of employees in organizations. Dark triad leadership also showed strong positive correlations with:

Burnout ($r = .76$)

HR Dysfunction ($r = .71$)

Meanwhile, psychological safety demonstrated a strong negative relationship with turnover intention ($r = -.69$), suggesting that psychologically safe workplaces reduce employee resignation intentions.

Regression Analysis

Hypothesis 1

Table 5: H1: Dark Triad leadership positively affects employee turnover intention

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Dark Triad Leadership	0.78	15.92	0.000

Interpretation: From the regression analysis, it was found that dark triad leadership has a significant effect on intention to quit ($\beta = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that increases in toxic leadership behaviors substantially increase employees' likelihood of leaving the organization. The model accounted for an explained variance of 64% ($R^2 = 0.64$) in turnover intention.

Regression Analysis for Burnout

Hypothesis 4

Table 6: H4: Psychopathic leadership significantly increases employee burnout

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Psychopathic Leadership	0.72	14.47	0.000

Interpretation: Psychopathic leadership had a significant positive effect on employee burnout ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$). Amongst employees who were exposed to emotionally unengaged and aggressive leadership behaviors, they experienced significantly more emotional exhaustion. The results are consistent with the job demands-resources theory, which implies that high emotional stress and low organizational support hasten the burnout.

Regression Analysis for Organizational Commitment

Hypothesis 2

Table 7: H2: Narcissistic leadership negatively affects organizational commitment

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Narcissistic Leadership	-0.67	-12.89	0.000

Interpretation: Narcissistic leadership was significantly negatively associated with organisational commitment ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = -0.67$). Staff members working with narcissistic leaders said that they were less attached and felt less confident in the organization's objectives.

Regression Analysis for Psychological Insecurity

Hypothesis 3

Table 8: H3: Machiavellian leadership positively influences psychological insecurity			
Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Machiavellian Leadership	0.74	13.96	0.000

Interpretation: After controlling for the other model variables, having a machiavellian leader had a strong positive relationship with psychological insecurity at work ($\beta = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$). Staff had feelings of fear, uncertainty, and lack of confidence in communicating under manipulative leadership.

Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis 5

Table 9: H5: HR dysfunction mediates the relationship between dark triad leadership and turnover intention

Relationship	Indirect Effect	Sig.
Dark Triad → HR Dysfunction → Turnover Intention	0.42	0.000

Interpretation: The mediation analysis shows that HR dysfunction has significant mediation effects in the relationship between dark triad leadership and the intention to leave. This means that when HR systems are not in place to protect employees, maintain accountability, and investigate complaints effectively, toxic leadership has the power to cause more harm. Poor HR systems reinforce the likelihood of job quitting when there are negative leadership scenarios.

Moderation Analysis

Hypothesis 6

Table 10: H6: Psychological safety moderates the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention

Moderator	Interaction Beta	Sig.
Psychological Safety	-0.36	0.002

Interpretation: Psychological safety was a significant negative moderator between the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$). That implies that the negative impacts of dark triad leadership may be mitigated with supportive organizational cultures and clear communication processes.

Table 11: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Results

Model Fit Index	Value	Recommended Value
CFI	0.94	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.05	< 0.08
GFI	0.92	> 0.90
Chi-square/df	2.11	< 3

Interpretation: Model fitness was satisfactory for the SEM, suggesting that the proposed conceptual model can explain the relationships among dark triad leadership, HR dysfunction, psychological safety, burnout, and turnover intention.

Discussion

All six hypotheses proposed in this study are well supported by the statistical results. Dark triad leadership had a significant impact on employee turnover intention, burnout, psychological insecurity, and organizational commitment. The highest mean score for the three dimensions of the dark triad was for machiavellianism ($M = 3.74$), and the strongest correlation was with burnout for psychopathy, while narcissism significantly decreased organizational commitment. The results also indicated that HR failure exacerbates the negative impact of toxic leadership by undermining accountability and employee protection mechanisms.

Under toxic leadership scenarios, psychological safety proved to be a protective organizational factor that can help decrease employee turnover. Overall, the results indicate that dark triad personality traits among leaders negatively impact employees' mental health, HR systems, and organizational turnover costs, thereby subtly undermining organizational stability. Many studies have shown that dark triad leadership traits negatively impact an organization's sustainability. According to a 2025 systematic review, the dark triad traits have significant impacts on interpersonal conflict, organizational dissatisfaction, employee well-being, and toxic workplace climates. In addition, approximately 5-20% of organizational outcomes are impacted by senior managers. Employees under toxic supervision say that they experience more emotional exhaustion and less commitment. Workplaces with a fear hierarchy are more likely to lead to employee turnover and absences. The results further indicate that HR dysfunction exacerbates the effects of toxic leadership, including a lack of accountability and employee protection.

Conclusion

Dark triad leadership is an invisible, internal danger that affects employees' health and employee turnover and deteriorates HR systems. These leaders, known as narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic, erect an atmosphere of fear, manipulation, emotional fatigue, and moral decay. There is a strong relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention, supported by research. When a worker is affected by manipulative leadership, they will soon psychologically withdraw from the workplace and seek safer employment opportunities. At the same time, weak accountability and organizational politics often lead to HR systems failing to prevent toxic leadership. It is important that organizations recognize that sustainability leadership is not about authority or achieving results. Ethical behavior, empathy, transparency, and employee health and wellness are also important for long-term success.

Recommendations

Organizations should adopt the following preventive strategies:

Ethical Recruitment: Use psychological assessments during leadership hiring and promotion.

Leadership Accountability: Develop transparent ethical performance evaluation systems.

Independent HR Structures: Ensure HR departments operate independently from executive influence. *Anonymous Reporting Systems:* Protect whistleblowers and encourage employee reporting.

Leadership Development Programs: Train managers in emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, conflict resolution, and psychological safety.

The following are preventive measures that organizations should implement: ethical recruitment, psychological assessment when hiring and promoting leadership, leadership accountability, publicize ethical performance evaluation systems, independent HR structures, HR structures removed from executive influence, anonymous reporting system, whistleblower protection, employee reporting. Leadership development programs equip managers with emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and conflict resolution.

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