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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AFTERMATH OF TOXIC WORK ENVIRONMENTS: THE BARRIERS TO RECOVERY AMONG EMPLOYEES

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INTRODUCTION

Toxic, negative, and destructive work environments have been classified as workplaces with “bad” management and dysfunctional relations and have gained interest from organizational behavioral researchers over the last ten years. These environments are characterized by bullying, gaslighting, and favoritism, as well as a lack of accountability, which altogether create a hostile environment and are detrimental to both individual employee health and the organization as a whole (Ariza-Montes et al., 2020). Although a good portion of existing studies concentrates on the recognition and intervention of the structural elements of violence and toxicity within the organization, it seems there is still plenty of room to explore on psychological scars inflicts on employees and the specific barriers that hinder their recovery (Verkuil et al., 2015).

It is evident that negative professional consequences arise from toxic workplaces, such as stunted career progress, derailment, and bad work relations (Ariza-Montes et al., 2020). However, the more hidden threat to employees’ mental health, abuse, and manipulation of the hierarchy often gets lesser notice, though it is no less, if not more, obnoxious. Employees who routinely encounter dramatic emotional states, who are subjected to devious practices and strained by unending threatened expectations, have been known to suffer from clinical depression, anxious states, burnout, and eventually post-traumatic stress disorder (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Namie & Namie, 2018). Notably, this cluster of psychological disorders is alarming as it is often insidious in onset and indolent in nature, resulting in a gradual erosion of one’s motivation, creativity, and, ultimately, well-being. The most accurate depiction is a stealthy assassin in the life of the sufferer, a quiet detractor of their very existence.

The relationship between career stagnation and degradation in mental health is a vicious cycle, wherein employees are constantly locked in a state of low self-esteem and a weakness to seek better workplaces or avenues for self-development and career expansion (Houshmand et al., 2012). With this phenomenon, it is essential to stress the importance of further studies investigating the impact of toxic workplaces in the long run and devising ways to put together structural organization and individual self-care. These strategies are necessary to manage the past’s effects and avert such horrors in the future. However, even with the awareness that this is the case, what remains a worrying issue is the fact that the obstacles to recovery have gained

little attention in the literature on organizational behavior. In particular, those employees who have been subjected to working in a toxic workplace are often unable to take any constructive steps as they know the impact and want to change the situation. Such barriers are complex factors that unison stamp out all post-stressor recovery attempts.

THE BARRIERS TO RECOVERY

Recovering from a toxic workplace environment poses significant challenges for employees, often due to several interrelated barriers. One major obstacle is the emotional trauma experienced by those exposed to such environments, including lingering stress, anxiety, and self-doubt arising from negative experiences. Toxic workplaces erode a person's sense of security, which can have a profoundly detrimental effect on overall well-being, particularly mental health, as highlighted by Rasool et al. (2021). In addition, this damage to mental health is often long-lasting and difficult to address, creating additional hurdles for recovery. Persistent criticism or devaluation in such environments can deeply undermine an individual's self-esteem, compounding the psychological impact. Therefore, overcoming these effects requires considerable time, effort, and often professional intervention to rebuild confidence and mental resilience.

Secondly, unresolved feelings, such as lingering anger or the absence of closure from past toxic experiences, can significantly hinder individuals from moving forward in their personal and professional lives. In the workplace, these unresolved emotions often manifest through negative behaviors like poor performance, lack of motivation, ineffective communication, and disengagement with the organization. Employee engagement, which serves as a vital emotional and physical connection between employees and the organization (Tanwar & Kumar, 2019), becomes difficult to establish under such circumstances. When these unresolved feelings persist, they disrupt the development of a supportive work culture and impede efforts to rehabilitate a toxic environment. Thus, addressing these issues is critical for fostering a collaborative and productive workplace that encourages growth and emotional well-being.

Third, insufficient support from workplace management systems, friends, mentors, or therapists can significantly hinder an individual's recovery process. Toxic workplace environments are pervasive and can affect organizations universally. However, personal reasons often deter employees from formally reporting such behaviors, as highlighted by Taylor and Rew (2010). This reluctance to address issues due to fears of retaliation and doubting organization action, coupled with victims' silence, complicates the identification and documentation of toxic incidents (Berquist et al., 2018). Consequently, addressing and resolving these toxic environments becomes increasingly challenging, perpetuating the problem and delaying meaningful interventions.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, while the desire for recovery and change may be present among affected employees, these barriers create a formidable obstacle, making it challenging to escape the harmful cycle of toxic workplace environments. Hence, addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort from organizations, policymakers, and mental health advocates to create supportive structures that empower employees to take proactive steps toward recovery and reintegration into healthier work settings.

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