

# The Impact of Toxic Management on Staff Burnout

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**Abstract.** The growing precarisation of labour relations makes it relevant to study toxic practices of human resource management and their impact on various aspects of employee well-being, including the development of the burnout syndrome. The article discusses various approaches to defining organisational toxicity, and analyses the current state of research in this area. The empirical research presented in the article aims to identify the relationships between the main elements of toxic management and employee burnout syndrome, using quantitative and qualitative methods: psycho-diagnostic tools and surveys by employees from various organisations. To identify the presence of toxic management elements in the organisation, the authors designed a questionnaire that allows evaluating the organisational environment according to five main categories. The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis that toxic management increases the level of work-related stress and affects the onset of the burnout syndrome that results from an unhealthy work-life balance, a negative emotional background, exhaustion and the lack of opportunity for employees to recover and use their personal resources. The study examined in detail the organisational toxins that employees of Russian organisations are regularly exposed to, and also identified the elements of toxic management, which trigger the development of professional burnout.

## 1. Introduction

The current state of labour economy in most countries is characterised by the growth of employment precarisation. The precarisation of labour relations directly affects the spread of toxic management, which has a negative impact on the socio-psychological and physical well-being of employees and labour productivity. Numerous studies have shown that a toxic work environment has a serious negative impact on employees, increases their stress levels due to unrealistic expectations imposed on them and has a devastating effect on their psychological and physical well-being. For example, employers in North America have been found to spend billions of dollars on countering the effects of workplace toxicity and toxic leadership [1]. Different employees perceive toxic management differently; a positive correlation was identified between a certain perception of management and the employee's decision to quit their jobs [2]. It should be noted that for some employees, a toxic leader may seem like a "hero" [3-6]. Toxic leaders, managers and employees are characterized by certain features of the so-called "Dark Triad": narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism [7]. It is noteworthy that such people often hold leadership positions and quickly make a career, although the results of recent studies demonstrate the influence of the alleged psychopathic traits in managers on the well-being of employees and their attitude to work [8]. The authors, based on the systemic

approach, assume that the working environment toxicity is determined by the presence of a set of certain elements (organizational toxins) in it, namely: toxic practices of personnel management, toxic management, a toxic leader, toxic workplaces and toxic personnel, which together form the toxic culture of the organization [9]. It is logical to assume that these elements exist in various combinations. Toxic management is dangerous both for the stability of the organization as a whole, and for the people working in it, it manifests itself in toxic practices of personnel management. An unfavorable organizational environment is characterized by a threatening atmosphere, where verbal threats, insults, rumors and gossip thrive. We assume that people who are regularly exposed to toxic management in their workplace are more likely to suffer from burnout, compared with employees working in organizations with constructive management.

The burnout syndrome is a condition resulting from prolonged exposure to stress factors at work, from chronic distress. According to the most common approach, employee burnout is characterized by exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced job satisfaction [10]. The symptoms of burnout also include a decreased motivation to work, frequent conflicts, a negative attitude towards work, fatigue, boredom, and irritation. Undoubtedly, the development of burnout syndrome is associated with a variety of factors, both external and internal [11]. It has been established that burnout is influenced by various factors: organizational, professional and personal. The most studied are the so-called organizational factors, which include poor work organization, disruptions in the systems of communication and planning, bureaucracy, increased personal responsibility for the work results, a negative socio-psychological climate in the team, as well as the specifics of the activity (for example, extreme working conditions) and customers (juvenile offenders, incurable patients, people with mental disorders), that are described in depth in research literature [12-13]. It has been established that burnout does not depend on work experience and age, however, it is more often found in those working with people: medical workers, teachers, salespeople, etc. It has been noted that people have different degrees of susceptibility to burnout depending on their personal characteristics, perception and experience of the circumstances of their professional activity, motivation for work, as well as the presence of moral defects and personality disorientation [14]. However, there is currently no unambiguous generally accepted list of these personal characteristics that could be used, for example, at the stage of employee selection. The factors that increase the individual's resistance to professional burnout have been extensively studied: in a number of studies, it was established that positive emotions and support from family and close friends, as well as having a hobby and a sufficient amount of properly organized free time, reduces the likelihood of burnout syndrome development [15-16].

Since toxic management increases the level of work-related stress, its presence in an organization contributes to the development of burnout syndrome in employees by disrupting their work-life balance, by creating a negative emotional background, exhaustion and the resulting inability to replenish personal physical and psychological resources. The purpose of the research presented in the article is to study organisational toxins that employees are regularly exposed to and to identify the elements of toxic management that trigger the development of emotional burnout in employees.

## **2. Methodology**

To determine the presence of emotional burnout syndrome, Boiko's methodology for diagnosing the level of professional burnout was used. The methodology consists of 84 questions, each question contains a statement which is to be answered as either "+" if the respondent agrees with the statement, or "-" if the respondent disagrees. The advantage of this method of determining the level of emotional burnout is the possibility of determining the phase of emotional burnout and the severity of its symptoms [17]. Professional burnout was considered within the framework of the general adaptation symptom by Selye [18]; in accordance with this, three burnout phases were identified, which manifest themselves as specific symptoms. The first phase (stress) is, in its essence, the triggering mechanism and includes the following four symptoms: experiencing traumatic circumstances, self-dissatisfaction, hopelessness, anxiety and depression. The second phase (resistance), although it is conditional, is resistance to increasing tension and manifests itself in the form of inadequate selective emotional

response, emotional and moral disorientation, expansion of the economy of emotions, reduction of professional duties. The development of the third phase of burnout (exhaustion) is accompanied by a decrease in physical and mental tone, there are such symptoms as: emotional deficit, emotional detachment, depersonalization, psychosomatic and autonomic disorders [19].

To determine the degree of workplace toxicity, a survey was conducted. The questionnaire was developed, based on 'The Toxic Workplace Checklist', to identify one or more violations at work in the following categories: 'Unfairness', 'Immoral and illegal activities', 'Abusive bosses and poisonous coworkers', 'Physical danger', 'Just plain annoying' [20-21]. It is believed that the presence in the organization of even one of these violations indicates a toxic organizational environment, and the presence of violations in several categories makes the workplace dangerously toxic. For each of the five categories, five direct questions were formulated, which allow identifying the organizational factors responsible for the emergence and development of toxic management. The questions are closed and offer the respondents a choice between one of the options ("yes" or "no").

The study, conducted from January to May 2019, involved 170 people aged from 23 to 55, 96 women (56.47%), 74 men (43.53%), with work experience in organizations of various economy sectors ranging from 1 to 28 years. The study was conducted on the basis of a state university, part-time students and students attending additional professional development courses were surveyed. Participation in the study was voluntary.

### **3. Results**

The results of the survey based on Boyko's methodology indicate that the overwhelming majority of the respondents are to some extent subject to burnout. The study used the data from four groups of respondents with varying degrees of burnout manifestation: Group 1 (17.54%) – the respondents with no signs of burnout phases; Group 2 (22.81%) – the respondents whose burnout phases are forming; Group 3 (31.58%) – the respondents who have formed separate phases of burnout; Group 4 (26.32%) – the respondents who have fully formed three phases of burnout. The results of the survey showed that only 11.76% of the respondents did not encounter organisational toxins in the workplace. Let us consider the distribution of the respondents' answers in five categories:

1. «Unfairness»: 73.53% of the respondents faced dishonesty and injustice at work. The respondents gave an affirmative answer to the question about having to perform someone else's functional duties, or about working for others without an appropriate extra pay. There were also cases of fraud regarding the amount of monetary remuneration, unfair punishment or accusation, as well as the manager's dishonesty;
2. «Immoral and illegal activities»: the category related to immoral and illegal actions was mentioned by 48.24% of the respondents. Most of them indicated that in order to advance in the organization it is necessary to have connections or family relationships with the management. A small number of respondents were faced with cases of discrimination on some grounds, about 8.82% of the respondents reported their bosses tried to involve them in illegal and unlawful actions;
3. "Abusive bosses and poisonous coworkers": 70.59% of the respondents were insulted at work, most of them noted abuse, or an inappropriate tone on the part of the head. To a lesser extent, the respondents encountered "toxic" colleagues, 16.47% of the respondents reported a predominantly "offensive" style of communication between colleagues. 2.94% of the respondents reported cases of harassment in the organization;
4. «Physical danger»: the largest number of respondents (79.41%) were faced with adverse factors that pose a threat to their health. They indicated that they had the following "organizational toxins": exhausting hours of work in excess of the norm, non-compliance with stipulated working conditions, violations of the contract in terms of guaranteed rest and the inability to take a sick leave;
5. «Just plain annoying»: 31.82% of the respondents encountered an invasion of their personal space at work, in fact, all of them mentioned tension due to constant calls and messages from

their supervisor during off-hours and weekends. The respondents also reported instances of rumors that damage their reputation (10.59%), as well as illegal surveillance at work and in social networks (7.06%).

The results obtained in the survey indicate that in the individuals with emerging or formed burnout phases, the categories that indicate toxic management are most pronounced (table 1).

**Table 1.** The respondents' distribution in groups according to the degree of burnout manifestation by main categories, %.

Category	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
«Unfairness»	20.00	92.31	88.89	77.78
«Immoral and illegal activities»	33.33	30.77	59.26	40.00
«Abusive bosses and poisonous coworkers»	13.33	97.44	88.89	66.67
«Physical danger»	6.67	100.00	96.30	86.67

The respondents of the first group, that is, those without established or developing phases of burnout, are less likely to face organizational toxins in all five categories, compared with the respondents from other groups. Thus, it can be concluded that increasing number of organizational toxins increases the level of burnout in employees. To test this assumption, we carried out a correlation analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) - a dimensionless index in the range from -1.0 to 1.0 inclusively, reflects the degree of linear relationship between two data arrays. The Pearson's correlation coefficient in this case was:  $r = 0.599379$ , which indicates a positive correlation of an average intensity between the toxicity of the organizational environment and burnout.

#### 4. Conclusion

The results of the research presented in the article indicate that toxic management contributes to the development of burnout syndrome in employees and leads to a negative attitude to work, to negative emotions, physical and mental exhaustion and the employees' inability to restore their physical and psychological resources. In the course of the study, the authors identified and reviewed the main organisational toxins that employees in Russian organisations are exposed to. The obtained results show that the main triggers for burnout are the following elements of toxic management: adverse working conditions that threaten the employees' health and lives, injustice and dishonesty regarding the distribution of workload and wages, as well as insults and threats from the superiors.

Thus, further research into toxic management and toxic organisational environment, in our opinion, should be accompanied by the development of convenient and reliable psycho-diagnostic tools, which, on the one hand, would allow identifying organisational toxins, and, on the other hand, would help assess the degree of employees' exposure to these toxins. It should also be noted that the prevention of employee burnout should start with studying the degree of organisational environment toxicity and taking management measures to eliminate organisational toxins.

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