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TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN HR

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

This Dissertation in Practice explored the lived experiences of human resources (HR) professionals who worked under toxic HR leaders. Toxic leadership and its negative effects have been studied in several industries and functions over the past two decades. While HR departments are often called upon to help identify and address toxicity, little research exists on the presence of toxic leaders within the HR department. This phenomenological study was conducted to explore the experiences of HR professionals who worked under toxic HR leaders. Seven themes emerged from the research: (1) the toxic HR leader was manipulative, controlling, and demeaning, (2) the toxic HR leader was incompetent and self-serving, and therefore did not match participants' expectations of an HR leader, (3) the toxic HR leader also displayed some positive traits, including intelligence and kindness, (4) various coping techniques were utilized by HR professionals when working for a toxic HR leader, including trying to explain the leader's behavior, (5) working for a toxic HR leader impacted followers' work performance, lowered their confidence, and took an emotional and physical toll, (6) the experience of working for the toxic HR leader had negative consequences after the experience ended, but participants ultimately felt they were in a better place, and (7) others in the organization were complicit in the leader's toxic behaviors or their retention of a leadership role; senior leaders were often blind to the toxic behavior. These themes and participants' stories were utilized to develop an interview guide to avoid toxicity in HR leadership. The implications of this research are significant given the negative effects of toxic leadership and the role of HR in developing other leaders.

Keywords: toxic leadership, human resources, HR, coping, performance

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the two amazing women I lost during the course of my doctoral studies. My mother-in-law, Graciela Garcia, passed away after a hard-fought battle with lung cancer as I was headed to orientation at Creighton. She was a second mom to me and would be so proud of this accomplishment. My grandmother, Virginia Oliver, who left us just last year, always appreciated my academic and professional accomplishments but ultimately loved me for me. I am a better person for having had these two women in my life.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Toxic leadership is both harmful to followers and prevalent in the workplace. In general terms, toxic leadership is a form of poor leadership that is destructive to both the leader's followers and their organization. Often the individuals who work for a toxic leader are afraid to address the leader's conduct and may even unknowingly feed into the leader's bad behavior (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). This makes toxicity difficult to identify or address, even in organizations with robust standards of conduct programs. While research on toxic leadership has increased over the past two decades, there is a lack of agreement on basic definitions or the label for the phenomenon, as some refer to these leadership behaviors as abusive (e.g., Harris et al., 2007), others as toxic (e.g., Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or destructive (e.g., Aasland et al., 2010). This lack of common nomenclature may further confuse efforts to understand this aspect of leadership and its impact on followers, teams, and organizations. Adding to the knowledge of toxic leadership behaviors and its repercussions can aid in organizations' abilities to avoid or combat its presence, given the damaging effects on both the organization and its workforce.

Toxic leadership can be detrimental to followers in the form of stress, decreased performance, and psychological harm (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Pelletier, 2012; Webster et al., 2016). In addition, toxic leadership behaviors have been found to be experienced by as many as one-third of workers (Aasland, et al., 2010) and in industries as diverse as hospitality (Hight et al., 2019), healthcare (Ozer et al., 2017), and investment banking (McDonald & Robinson, 2009). The followers of toxic leaders who have participated in formal research have worked in fields such as customer service, nursing, social work, and even leadership (Hight et al., 2019; McDonald & Robinson, 2009; Ozer et al., 2017;

Yagil et al., 2011). While one dissertation examined how human resources (HR) professionals handle toxic leadership within their organizations (Maxwell, 2015), the research on the presence of toxic leadership within the human resources (HR) department is extremely limited.

Statement of the Problem

In workplace research over the past several decades, leadership has been found to impact the performance of individual followers (e.g., Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Dvir et al., 2002) and organizations overall (e.g., Choudhary et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011). Much of the research has focused on the positive impact of leadership styles such as transformational or servant leadership (e.g., Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Dvir et al., 2002), but research related to the dark side of leadership has also been on the rise. Toxic leadership can be harmful to followers in several ways (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Webster et al., 2016) and followers' performance is often negatively impacted (Harris et al., 2007).

Researchers have studied the causes and impacts of toxic leadership in various industries and organizational functions (e.g., Aasland et al., 2010; Aryee et al., 2007; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). The recommended actions to combat toxicity in the workplace often involve the HR department, including early identification of toxic leaders, organizational training, and aligning incentives with positive corporate values (Erickson et al., 2015; Goldman, 2008; Webster et al., 2016). While the HR department is included in studies as a recommended resource for addressing toxic leadership, there is very limited research on the existence of toxic leadership within that department. Therefore, the impact of toxic leadership within the HR department needed exploration.

In addition, while there has been an increase in quantitative research on toxic leadership over the past two decades, there is a need for additional qualitative research on the subject (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Much of the prior research has focused on the traits of a toxic leader (Thoroughgood et al., 2018), which is a research focus that lends itself to discrete, quantitative study. Qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which is arguably more critical when studying phenomena that are highly sensitive and ill-defined. By gathering qualitative input from those impacted by toxic leadership, existing definitions might be clarified in the context of the real world.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological dissertation in practice study was to describe the lived experience of HR professionals in various industries who work for a toxic HR leader. Secondly, the study explored whether these individuals perceive any impact to their performance as a result of working for their leader.

Research Questions

Given the call for qualitative research (Thoroughgood et al., 2018) and the lack of research on toxic leadership within the HR department, this study was targeted at meeting both research gaps. By studying the follower's lived experience of toxic leadership within HR, insight was provided into whether this experience is similar to, or different than, the experiences described in other roles. This study extends the understanding of the overall impacts of toxic leadership from prior research and how it is experienced by the follower. This study allowed for an expanded view of how toxic leadership impacts employees in the department tasked with addressing toxicity.

This phenomenological study was aimed at exploring the experiences of HR professionals who work for a toxic HR leader. The research questions posed for this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of HR professionals who work under a toxic HR leader?
2. Do HR professionals who work under a toxic HR leader perceive any impact to their own performance because of their leader?

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to provide criteria against which to assess potential HR leaders. Specifically, the criteria may enable business and HR executives to avoid hiring or promoting toxic leaders in their HR department. The negative consequences of toxic leadership indicate this is an important endeavor in any department within an organization, such as finance, sales, and HR. Much of the literature recommends HR involvement in addressing toxic leadership through interventions such as training, policy creation, and pre-hire leader screening (Aryee et al., 2007; Boddy, 2014; Goldman, 2008), so minimizing the presence and impact of toxicity in the HR department is critical. Providing criteria or guidance for removing existing toxic leaders from an HR department was outside of the scope of this study.

Definition of Relevant Terms

Several of the terms used in this dissertation in practice may have multiple meanings given the context in which they are used. This dissertation focused primarily on the HR department and toxic leadership, which have varied definitions within the existing literature. The following terms were used operationally within this study:

Human resources (HR): The organizational department which houses the functions of employee recruitment, employee relations, training and development, compensation, benefits, and employee policy creation and interpretation.

Human resources (HR) professional: An employee at any level who works in at least one of the departmental functions of HR and self-identifies as working in HR.

Human resources (HR) leader: The manager of an HR professional who also works within or leads one of the HR functions; not a general management leader, finance leader, chief executive, or leader of another function or business segment.

Toxic leadership: A style of leadership encompassing any number of behaviors harmful to the follower, as interpreted by the follower. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, manipulation, name-calling, pitting employees against one another, and lying to or about followers (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). A broad definition of toxic leadership was given to participants when they were invited to participate in the study, in order to allow them to opt into the study by having worked for a leader who meets this criterion. In some prior research, a definition of toxic leadership was not provided to participants (Hight et al., 2019), but this approach may have made it too difficult for participants to self-select into this study.

Methodology Overview

A qualitative methodology was selected for this study to allow for an examination of followers' shared experiences and to respond to the call for additional qualitative research on toxic leadership (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). The phenomenological approach included interviews of 12 participants, which meets the range recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) of 10 to 15 participants. For this study, participants self-

identified as HR professionals and as having worked for a toxic HR leader in the prior five to ten years. Participants were recruited through professional HR associations based in Southeast Texas and were interviewed via a real-time online video format.

The interview questions were open-ended (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and focused on the experiences of the participants during and after the time they reported to a toxic leader. The participants were asked to provide information on the following topics: (a) a description of the leader's toxic behaviors, (b) any knowledge regarding whether or not the toxic leader completed leadership training, (c) the perceptions followers have of any impact the toxic HR leader has had on them and their job performance, and (d) coping techniques used by the followers. The questions were tested and refined through a prior pilot study I conducted and allowed for the exploration of the identified research questions.

Data analysis followed recommendations from Saldana (2008) and Elliott (2018). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The collected data was first analyzed utilizing open coding such that each relevant statement was coded. Codes were then grouped into broad categories before being arranged into themes and compared to prior research on the topic of toxic leadership. I utilized member checking to ensure the captured themes were accurate in the opinions of the participants. The comparisons between the themes and earlier research helped to determine any overlap or divergence in the participants' experiences and those found in prior studies.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Personal Biases

Limitations

All qualitative research studies are limited in generalizability (Creswell & Poth,

2018), as they provide an in-depth examination of a phenomenon, culture, or case, without asserting the findings would be true in other situations, individuals, or populations. In addition, the qualitative approach does not allow for any claims of causality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While this study provided insight into the lived experiences of the participating HR professionals, their experiences do not represent the experiences of all individuals working under a toxic HR leader. The richness of the qualitative data gathered should provide critical information, however, which allow for a better understanding of toxicity when it exists within the HR function.

An identified limitation was the potential to not recruit enough participants, but this proved not to be an issue. Two initial respondents failed to respond to additional inquiries regarding scheduling an interview and a third respondent asked to be rescheduled but was not available to participate. Some participants were initially slow to provide detailed stories of their experiences with a toxic HR leader, but ultimately all participants provided enough detail for analysis. There was some concern these experiences may be too painful to discuss in detail. There is some evidence sharing painful stories is more helpful than harmful (Biddle et al., 2013), which may have been true for this study as most participants seemed happy to share their experience and contribute to research on the subject of toxic leadership in HR. Some participants expressed concern about the confidentiality of the information shared. Explaining and reviewing the data protection measures, including the use of aliases and the maintenance of audio and text files in password-protected format on a personal computer, lessened this concern.

Delimitations

The boundaries of the research, in order to make it feasible, included the geographical location of participants and the focus of the questions asked. I conducted the study in the Houston, Texas area, and the participants overwhelmingly worked in the oil and gas, energy, and healthcare industries. A different mix of industry representation may have been included if the study were conducted in another part of the U.S. There was no focus on a particular industry in participant recruitment, however, as that may have limited the sample size too much.

A second delimitation was the focus of the interview questions. I focused my interview questions on the followers' description of the toxic leader's behaviors, their experience working for them, any perceived impact on themselves or their performance, any coping mechanisms they utilized, and any known leadership training the leader may have attended. I did not ask about the organizational environment, the reporting structure within HR, or the perceived causes of the leader's toxic behaviors. Although some insights in these areas did arise in the interviews, a deep analysis of these topics was beyond my intended scope.

The final noted delimitation was the selection of a qualitative phenomenological approach. This approach provided insights into the shared experiences of several individuals but did not allow for the analysis of one experience in the same way a narrative or case study approach might (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study or narrative would have provided insight into the experiences of an individual follower or an intact team (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but would not have allowed for the study of common themes amongst HR professionals who each work for a toxic leader. In addition,

this approach did not explore the organizational culture as an ethnographic approach would (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Personal Biases

Given my experience working in HR for twenty years and working with toxic HR leaders on more than one occasion, I was aware of personal biases which may have influenced the gathering or analysis of data in this study. Qualitative research requires the involvement and interpretations of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which must be balanced with the desire for bracketing in phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I aimed to achieve this balance by utilizing my background to build rapport with participants and to discuss the overall findings, while setting those experiences aside during data collection and analysis. This approach allowed me to interpret the data collected, including any unexpected findings, without completely ignoring my background in HR or with toxic leaders. I took care to interpret the data presented and not fill in gaps in the data with my own assumptions or experiences.

The Role of Leadership in this Study

Leadership is fundamentally about the relationship and interactions with followers (Haslam et al., 2011). Toxic leadership has likely gained so much attention because the negative interactions it encompasses are contrary to most people's perceptions of an effective leader, and yet many toxic leaders rise to very powerful positions (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). When those leadership ascents occur in the function tasked with identifying and addressing toxicity, the implications may be particularly concerning.

Furthermore, there is often an expectation that HR leaders have additional training on effective leadership practices. The professional certifications offered in the field

require knowledge of ethical practice, labor laws, and leadership development (SHRM, 2019), which highlight actions counter to the behaviors of a toxic leader. Unlike in industries or functions where toxic leadership behaviors are conjectured to arise due to a lack of training (Hight et al., 2019), HR leaders who display toxicity are seemingly doing so in spite of training. This aspect of toxic leadership's appearance within HR was initially explored in this study but will require additional research to be fully understood.

Significance of the Dissertation in Practice Study

Further understanding toxic leadership, in order to identify or avoid it altogether, is an important endeavor. Prior research has focused on the precursors to toxicity (e.g., Aryee et al., 2007), its effects on followers (e.g., Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013), and its impact on individual and organizational performance (e.g., Saqib & Arif, 2017). This study adds to the research by providing additional insight to toxic leadership in a functional department not previously examined. In addition, this study helps answer the call for additional qualitative research on toxic leadership which considers context and interactions with followers (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Finally, this study contributes to the research on effective leadership in the HR function by exploring one form of ineffective leaders in the field.

This study will hopefully improve practice in organizations given the role HR is often required to play in identifying and resolving toxic leadership in other functions. By understanding the impact of toxicity with HR and its perceived impact on HR followers' performance, there may be an ability to improve HR's credibility and influence as a function. In addition, the outcomes from this study provide insight into the lived experiences of some HR professionals working under a toxic HR leader. While these

results are not generalizable, the combination of these results and those of prior research studies on toxic leadership may help organizational leaders identify toxic HR leaders and either rehabilitate, remove, or avoid them.

Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

One of my favorite courses in the Ed.D. program has been the course on toxic leadership. As a child, I found myself fascinated reading the biographies of leaders who made poor decisions like Richard Nixon and Adolf Hitler. In my undergraduate studies in psychology, I was interested in abnormal psychology, the study of mental illness and dysfunction. There is something about learning more about things that are not working that helps me better recognize and understand the positive. This interest continued in this program, as I found myself drawn to the subject of toxic leadership. In learning more about toxicity, I hope to be able to recognize it and remove it when I see it in myself or others.

As an HR professional, I believe I have a calling to help leaders be the best leaders they can be, which involves guarding against toxic leadership in the organizations in which I work. Unfortunately, I have witnessed toxic leadership within HR, which I personally find alarming. If HR is called upon to root out toxic leaders elsewhere in the organization, we are further challenged when it exists on our teams. By studying toxicity within HR, I hope to reduce toxic leadership and improve the HR function to better serve organizations.

Summary

Toxic leadership is damaging to followers in several ways, including to their individual performance. While research on this form of leadership is plentiful, there is a

gap in the literature both for qualitative studies and research on the presence of toxic leadership in the HR department. This phenomenological study should contribute to closing these gaps and provide insight into the lived experiences of HR professionals working under a toxic leader. In addition, given prior research on the relationship between toxic leadership and follower performance, this study explored the impacts those followers perceive to their own performance. The aim of this study was to develop criteria against which to assess HR leaders prior to hire or promotion. In the phenomenological tradition, interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to explore this phenomenon in-depth.

There are inherent limitations and delimitations to all qualitative or phenomenological studies, and this study was no exception. My personal biases, as an HR professional who has worked with toxic HR leaders, were controlled as much as possible in the study design and data analysis. Even with these challenges, this study may provide a better understanding of toxic leadership in general and its impacts on a group of individuals often tasked with addressing its presence elsewhere in the organization. The information gathered through this study informs future research and assists organizations who desire to avoid toxic leaders within their HR function.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have found employees experience some level of toxic leadership behaviors present in as many as 83.7% of interactions with their leaders (Aasland et al., 2010). Aasland et al. (2010) distinguish between those toxic behaviors that harm the organization (anti-organization) and those that harm the subordinate (anti-subordinate). Anti-organization behavior is described as including behaviors such as stealing from the organization or involvement in corporate corruption whereas anti-subordinate behavior includes actions such as harassment and mistreatment of followers (Aasland et al., 2010). While the prevalence of anti-subordinate behaviors occurring 'often' or 'quite often' is closer to 12% (Aasland et al., 2010), this is a more serious issue than what Aryee et al. (2007) refer to as an infrequent occurrence in the workplace. Toxic leadership has been found to impact both individual performance (Harris et al., 2007) and organizational performance (Saqib & Arif, 2017). Toxic leadership's prevalence and impact on performance indicate its importance both in research and in practice. If an organization desires to improve the performance of its employees, limiting or eliminating the presence of toxic leadership may help.

Over the past two decades, the research on this negative leadership approach has increased dramatically. Researchers have studied various forms of toxicity, including abusive leadership, destructive leadership, psychopathy, and narcissism. Extensive research exists on the effects of toxic leadership on followers and the coping techniques followers use when working under a toxic leader. While almost no research exists on the effectiveness of organizational interventions in rooting out or addressing toxic leaders, each study conducted makes some recommendations for interventions.

The recommended interventions in research studies often require involvement from or leadership by the HR department, but no research exists on the effects of toxic leadership within that department. By considering the presence of toxic leadership in the department tasked with addressing it elsewhere, we may better understand the HR department's ability to enact these recommended interventions. In addition, by understanding the perceived impact of a toxic HR leader on their followers' performance, we gain insight into the ability of HR employees to perform in the face of toxic leadership.

Toxic Leadership Defined

Before defining toxic leadership, it is important to understand what is meant by 'leadership.' Most researchers agree leadership involves influencing followers toward a common goal (e.g., Aryee et al., 2007; Naseer et al., 2016). Thoroughgood et al. (2018) emphasize leadership is not one-directional, and is inclusive of the follower, the situational context, and the broader organizational and cultural environments. Most leadership research is focused on positive traits, behaviors, and processes enhancing follower outcomes, but research interest in the dark side of leadership, including toxic leadership, has increased over the past two decades. Aasland et al. (2010) notes destructive forms of leadership often co-exist with constructive, or positive, forms of leadership. In other words, no leadership situation is all good or all bad.

Defining toxic leadership is one of the challenges in this field of research. Definitions vary, as does the overall name of the phenomenon, including the labels toxic leadership, abusive supervision, destructive leadership, and the traits of psychopathy and narcissism. Each of these forms of poor leadership is outlined below, along with the

behaviors associated with them. In addition, I have included the definition I will utilize in this study.

Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is defined as an ongoing pattern of leadership behaviors that are self-serving and harmful to followers, teams, and organizations (Erickson et al., 2015; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Webster et al., 2016). This form of leadership does not simply encompass the lack of effective management skills but describes either willful aggression or indifference towards followers and the organization (Hight et al., 2019). Toxic leadership is premeditated (Hight et al., 2019), not accidental.

Lipman-Blumen (2005) outlines several behaviors and qualities found in toxic leaders. These include leaving followers worse off than they were before, encouraging followers to mistreat others, arrogance, and a lack of integrity (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Other definitions of toxic leadership refer to extreme and deliberate behaviors such as manipulation, intimidation, and divisiveness (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Webster et al., 2016). Leaders are typically not all bad and toxic leadership behaviors co-exist with more positive leadership behaviors in most individuals (Burns, 2017; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). For example, individuals who display toxicity are often considered charming or charismatic (Burns, 2017; Kets de Vries, 2003). This phenomenon can make toxic leaders harder to identify and address. Followers may opt to look only at the positive aspects of their leader and downplay these negative aspects, which can be particularly problematic given the detrimental impact toxic leaders have on followers. In addition to toxic leadership, researchers have also defined and studied abusive supervision, which is closely related to toxic leadership.

Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision is described as a persistent show of hostility, both verbally and non-verbally, but not physically (Harris et al., 2007; Tepper, 2000; Walter et al., 2015). Physical hostility would cross the line into violence (Tepper, 2000). Both Tepper (2000) and Hight et al. (2019) extend the definition of abusive supervision to include willful disregard or indifference. Researchers note abusive supervision is determined by the subordinate, and the assessment of a leader as abusive may vary by subordinate or by situation (Hight et al., 2019; Tepper, 2000).

Abusive supervision has many behavioral characteristics that are both verbal and nonverbal. Verbal behaviors include angry outbursts, taking credit for subordinates' work, rudeness, and public humiliation (Harris et al., 2007; Hight et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2012; Tepper, 2000). Nonverbal abusive supervision behaviors include the silent treatment, aggressive eye contact, and inflexibility (Ayree et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2007). Other behaviors associated with abusive supervision include threats of job loss and actively undermining subordinates (Ayree et al., 2007; Tepper et al., 2011). The defined elements of abusive supervision are fully contained within the definition of toxic leadership, which is broader. In other words, abusive supervision is a subset of toxic leadership, and the research associated with abusive leadership will be considered as such for the purposes of this study. Another term frequently used in the research related to the dark side of leadership is destructive leadership, which is more broad than toxic leadership but includes many toxic leadership behaviors.

Destructive Leadership

Destructive leadership is a wide category of leadership styles which includes toxic

leadership and is harmful to both followers and organizations (Aasland et al., 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Like abusive supervision, destructive leadership is systematic and persists over time (Erickson et al., 2015). Thoroughgood et al. (2018) note this form of leadership requires not only bad behaviors on the part of the manager, but also susceptibility on the part of the follower, as well as an environment that allows the destructive nature of the relationship to thrive. Destructive leadership behaviors are very similar to those described as abusive supervision, but also include deception that harms customers, theft from the organization, and disrespectful behavior toward superiors (Aasland et al., 2010; Hight et al., 2019). Destructive leadership overlaps with toxic leadership in that both refer to behaviors which harm followers and organizations. Destructive leadership is broader as it also includes behaviors targeted outside of the organization, such as at customers or partners, which is not considered an element of toxic leadership. Therefore, only studies incorporating destructive leadership research directed at followers, internal teams, or the organization itself, will be considered for this study.

Psychopathy and Narcissism

Two specific personality traits discussed in the toxic leadership literature and therefore merit mention are psychopathy and narcissism. Boddy (2014) indicates psychopaths make up one percent of the overall population and, if they have violent tendencies, often end up in jail or mental institutions. He points out, however, many psychopaths openly live in society (Boddy, 2014). Psychopaths are particularly attracted to leadership in organizations because the associated power meets a need of their condition (Boddy, 2014). Boddy (2014) notes they engage in bullying and other forms of

conflict in the workplace. Babiak and Hare (2006) warn corporate psychopaths are often difficult to identify because their psychopathy also leads them to be very charming, charismatic, and manipulative.

Narcissism is a personality disorder defined as encompassing “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, sense of entitlement, and lack of empathy” (Babiak & Hare, 2006, p. 40). These traits show up in the other definitions of toxic leadership, in which leaders are described as self-serving and operating with a magnified sense of self-worth (Erickson et al., 2015; Hight et al., 2019). Lavoie-Tremblay et al. (2015) note narcissism is a trait of abusive supervision. Kets de Vries (2003) points out narcissism, which he describes as a facet of toxic leadership, likely exists at low levels in all leaders. He goes on to state at high levels, narcissism can be damaging to both followers and organizations (Kets de Vries, 2003). Narcissism and psychopathy may be elements of toxic leadership but are not synonyms. In addition, both disorders can be applicable to non-leaders and those outside of organizations as well. The elements of narcissism and corporate psychopathy and the associated research will be incorporated into the definition of toxic leadership for this study only to extent they are related to leadership and the impact to followers.

Definition for this Study

The definitions of toxic leadership, abusive supervision, destructive leadership, and the traits narcissism and psychopathy overlap considerably. A broad definition of toxic leadership, to include elements from several of these phenomena, will be incorporated into the final definition for this study. The definition of toxic leadership to be shared with potential participants, which will allow them to self-identify as having

worked for a toxic leader, is as follows:

Toxic leadership is a pervasive, enduring pattern of leader behaviors that are harmful to the follower and/or the organization. Some examples of toxic leadership include belittling remarks, public humiliation, pitting employees against one another, taking credit for others' work, bullying, manipulating others, and leaving subordinates worse off than they were before.

Toxic Leadership: Effects

Researchers have found various impacts from the presence of toxic leadership in the workplace, both to followers and to the organization overall. Some detrimental effects of toxic leadership on followers include lower affective organizational commitment, lower job satisfaction, and decreased individual performance.

Lower Affective Organizational Commitment

Affective organizational commitment is defined as an affinity for, attachment to, and identification with the organization (Ayree et al., 2007). It includes elements such as pride in the organization and giving extra effort to achieve organizational goals (Lambert et al., 2015), and is closely aligned with employee engagement. When affective organizational commitment is low, it has been associated with a higher intent to leave the organization (Lambert et al., 2015), lower job performance (Fu & Deshpande, 2014; Riketta, 2002), and increased complaints of ill health (Schalk, 2011). Ayree et al. (2007) found toxic leadership was negatively correlated to organizational commitment in their study within one telecommunications company in China.

Similar results were found in a study of more than 100 professionals in India, where reports of abusiveness on the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) were significantly

negatively correlated to the organizational commitment statements “I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization” ($r = -.835, p < .01$), “I feel emotionally attached to this organization” ($r = -.845, p < .01$), and “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me” ($r = -.839, p < .01$) (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013, p. 20). The other toxic leadership factors within the TLS, namely promoting inequity, indecisive, divisiveness, and lack of integrity, also correlated negatively to all organizational commitment statements, with one exception. There was a less-strong statistically significant relationship between the toxic behavior promoting inequity and the organizational commitment statement “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own” ($r = -.544, p < .01$) (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013, p. 20). This weaker relationship between inequity and the statement regarding ownership of the organization’s problems may indicate factors other than perceived equity drive employees’ perceptions of problem ownership.

Employees who report toxic leadership behaviors in their supervisor generally report feeling “emotionally absent” (Hight et al., 2019, p. 97) and having lower affective well-being (Boddy, 2014). Employees may also feel more anxious or discouraged in their role (Boddy, 2014), which may lead them to withdraw emotionally from their work or their organization.

Lower Job Satisfaction

There is face validity, or the appearance of a reasonable relationship (Babbie, 2017), to the notion toxic leadership is associated with lower job satisfaction. Researchers have confirmed the presence of toxic leadership is related to decreased job satisfaction in various countries and industries. In a study by Mathieu et al. (2014), job satisfaction,

measured using the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), was negatively correlated with the presence of corporate psychopathy in the leader ($r = -.45, p < .01$), measured using B-Scan 360. This negative correlation was found with a small sample of employees in a financial institution and was even stronger in a sample of 476 public service employees ($r = -.51, p < .01$) (Mathieu et al., 2014). The researchers went on to use structural equation modeling (SEM) to approximate relationships and direction between the variables, and in both samples, ratings of leader corporate psychopathy negatively predicted job satisfaction (Mathieu et al., 2014).

Similar results were found in a subsequent study by Mathieu and Babiak (2016) with employees of a non-profit organization, although a weaker relationship between the variables was found ($r = -.28, p < .01$). The difference in the strength of the results may have been due to demographic differences between the sampled employees. Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) also found statistically significant correlations between toxic leadership behaviors and job satisfaction statements for employees in various industries in India.

In his foundational study which created the de facto quantitative measure of toxic leadership, Tepper (2000) found subordinates who rated their supervisor higher on the scale of toxic leadership indicated less favorable attitudes toward their job. In their qualitative study within the hospitality industry, Hight et al. (2019) found job dissatisfaction was experienced by those individuals who worked for a toxic leader. Based on the variety in the measures and samples used in these studies to measure job satisfaction, the conclusion there is a negative relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction appears sound.

Decreased Individual Performance

Several researchers have found a negative relationship between the presence of toxic leadership behaviors and the performance of individual followers. Harris et al. (2007) found a direct negative relationship between toxic leadership and both prior formal performance review ratings and ad hoc reviews of performance at the time of the study. Unfortunately, they found this relationship was strongest for those employees who derive great meaning from their work (Harris et al., 2007). Most organizations want employees to find meaning in their work, and these findings indicate toxic leadership can have a greater negative impact on performance where employees' perceived meaning is high.

Farh and Chen (2014) found one facet of performance, team-role performance, was impacted by toxic leadership behaviors targeted at either individuals or the team. Team-role performance is the cooperation amongst team members (Farh & Chen, 2014), which is critical in work environments that are team-based or highly matrixed. One challenge in determining the relationship between toxic leadership and subordinate performance is the toxic leader is typically the one evaluating the performance of the subordinate.

Researchers do not universally agree on a direct relationship between toxic leadership and decreased individual performance. Walter et al. (2015) state some uncertainty remains about both the relationship itself and any directional causality between toxic leadership and subordinate performance. They ultimately found this relationship is dependent on the leader's outcome dependency on the subordinate (Walter et al., 2015). In other words, the presence of toxic leadership was negatively related to

subordinate performance only in situations where the supervisor's outcomes depended heavily on the outcomes of the subordinate. Where the supervisor's outcomes were unrelated to the outcomes of the subordinate employee, there was no significant relationship between toxic leadership behaviors and the subordinate's performance (Walter et al., 2015). These results indicate toxic leadership's negative impacts are limited if the supervisor's outcomes are not dependent on those of the subordinate.

Nandkeolyar et al. (2014) also determined a moderating variable in the relationship between toxic leadership and individual job performance. In their study of insurance claim processors in India, Nandkeolyar et al. (2014) found conscientiousness, characterized by reliability, strong work ethic, and self-discipline, mediates the negative relationship between toxic leadership and individual performance. In their study, toxic leaders did not negatively impact the performance of highly conscientious employees. The researchers describe highly conscientious individuals as those who persevere to complete job duties even in the face of a stressful work environment (Nandkeolyar et al., 2014). If organizations focus on hiring individuals who are highly conscientious or developing that trait in their existing employees, the impact of existing toxic leaders on employee performance may be mitigated.

The findings of the Walter et al. (2015) and Nandkeolyar et al. (2014) studies do not negate the assertion there is a negative relationship between toxic leadership and individual subordinate performance. Their findings indicate the impact of toxic leaders is complex. This notion is echoed in the call by Thoroughgood et al. (2018) to consider various aspects of the environment and leadership relationship when studying the topic of toxic leadership.

Summary of Effects

Ultimately, a lack of organizational commitment may lead employees to contribute only at bare minimum levels or opt to leave the organization entirely. By allowing toxic leadership to exist, an organization may be decreasing employee performance (Farh & Chen, 2014; Harris et al., 2007) and increasing their employee turnover (Farh & Chen, 2014; Hight et al., 2019; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2015). If employees with toxic leaders are less likely to display organizational commitment and are less satisfied in their jobs, the likelihood they will give discretionary effort is low. Considering the coping mechanisms used by employees with toxic leaders may provide insights into why many of them remain in reporting relationships with these leaders.

Toxic Leadership: Coping

Coping behaviors utilized by employees reporting directly to toxic leaders are described as passive or active. Passive coping mechanisms include silence and avoidance, while active behaviors include speaking up, direct communication, and seeking social support. While coping appears to be a positive way for employees to handle toxic leaders, some forms of coping can be harmful to either the individual or the organization.

Passive Coping Behaviors

Passive coping behaviors in the face of toxic leadership involve steps by which the subordinate fails to act on resolving the toxic relationship. Saqib and Arif (2017) found subordinates may employ silence to avoid further damage when toxic leadership behaviors are present. In their study of banking employees in Pakistan, toxic leadership was measured using the Toxic Leadership Scale developed by Schmidt (2008) and silence was evaluated using the Employee Silence Scale developed by Tangirala and

Ramanujam (2008). Their findings indicate toxic leadership led to an increase in employee silence (Saqib & Arif, 2017). Silence is only one form of coping, so followers may use this coping technique along with others.

Avoidance of the supervisor is another passive coping technique, which was found to be more strongly related to abusive supervision ($r = .48, p < .01$) in the study by Yagil et al. (2011). Webster et al. (2016) found as many as 17% of participants in their study employ avoidance as a coping technique when working for a toxic leader. Subordinates may use avoidance because the emotional toll of working for a toxic leader requires them to attempt to conserve their energy, as indicated by the conservation of resources theory (Saqib & Arif, 2017). Avoidance may also allow subordinates to mediate the negative effects of toxic leadership, but avoidance of the leader is ultimately found to be both ineffective and related to followers' negative moods (Yagil et al., 2011). Avoidance is an often used coping technique by the followers of toxic leaders, but its use has its limits in effectiveness.

While these two coping behaviors may provide immediate relief from the effects of toxicity, they can increase levels of distress (Yagil et al., 2011) and may decrease organizational performance (Saqib & Arif, 2017). In at least one study, however, avoidance coping was found to moderate the effects of toxic leadership on subordinate job performance (Nandkeolyar et al., 2014). The conflicting research outcomes on silence and avoidance make the effectiveness of these coping techniques unclear.

Active Coping Behaviors

Active coping measures by subordinates of toxic leaders include ingratiating one's self to the leader, seeking social support, and speaking up. In utilizing these

techniques, the subordinate takes some form of action to decrease their emotional distress or address the situation, but the outcomes from doing so can vary.

Yagil et al. (2011) define ingratiation as “flattery, conformity, and doing favors” (p. 7) for the leader. They found followers of a toxic leader were more likely to use ingratiation than some other active coping behaviors such as speaking up because it requires less courage (Yagil et al., 2011). Hight et al. (2019) found some employees attempted to ingratiate themselves to their toxic leader as a way to cope, but later abandoned the technique due its lack of effectiveness in resolving the negative relationship. Given liking a subordinate does not impact the relationship between toxic leadership and subordinate performance (Walter et al., 2015), ingratiation is likely an ineffective coping technique in dealing with a toxic leader.

Seeking support involves talking to colleagues or family members about the toxic leader’s behaviors and the emotional impact of those behaviors (Yagil et al., 2011). This form of coping is significantly related to toxic leadership (Yagil et al., 2011) and has been utilized by as many as 34% of individuals working for a toxic leader (Webster et al., 2016). Seeking support is also correlated with an increase in negative affect on the part of the follower ($r = .47, p < .01$) (Yagil et al., 2011). This may be due to individuals commiserating about the toxic leader, which can increase the time thinking about the negative aspects of the situation. This increased time spent thinking and talking about the toxic leader can intensify distress.

Yagil et al. (2011) found direct communication, which they measured using statements such as “I talk to the supervisor about the problems in our relationship so that he/she will stop acting that way” and “I insist that the supervisor stop behaving like that

towards me” (p. 22), was positively related to positive affect at a statistically significant level ($r = .36, p < .01$). In another study, subordinates reported using direct communication techniques, but when they did not yield results in reducing the toxic behaviors, the behaviors were abandoned or replaced with other coping strategies (Webster et al., 2016). It is unclear whether direct communication is effective in resolving the effects of toxic leaders, but it is noted as one of the more frequently used coping techniques by subordinates working under a toxic leader (Webster et al., 2016). Direct communication with the toxic leader may not result in a reduction of the impact of toxic leadership.

Summary of Coping Behaviors

Understanding the various forms of coping utilized by the subordinates of toxic leaders may shed light on the ways subordinates remain in reporting relationships with toxic leaders. Passive and active coping behaviors have diverse impacts to the relationship with the toxic leader and the affect of the subordinate. Additional research on the effectiveness of various coping behaviors is needed. By considering the effectiveness of coping strategies, a better understanding can be gained as to how toxic leadership may impact other aspects of the workforce, namely turnover, general morale, and even organizational performance.

Toxic Leadership: Recommended Interventions

Research is limited on the impact of interventions to address toxic leadership in the workplace. Researchers in the field have recommended several forms of interventions through the discussions of their research, including proactive identification of toxic leaders, policies, and training.

Proactive Identification of Toxic Leaders

Limiting the impact of toxic leaders requires their identification (Hight et al., 2019), which has already been noted as difficult given the low likelihood of subordinates speaking up (Webster et al., 2016) and the frequent pairing of toxic leadership behaviors and charismatic characteristics (Burns, 2017; Kets de Vries, 2003). Identifying dysfunctional or toxic behaviors is the responsibility of both senior leaders and HR (Erickson et al., 2015). Nandkeolyar et al. (2014) specifically call out the responsibility of HR professionals in identifying the use of coping techniques as signs of the presence of toxic leaders. HR professionals must pay attention and respond to anecdotal reports of potential toxicity, as subordinates are unlikely to make formal reports of such behaviors (Webster et al., 2016). The use of periodic surveys and active listening are two techniques recommended to identify toxic leadership behaviors that may go unreported by employees.

Policies

The implementation of policies is a frequently cited intervention for toxic leadership. Organizations are encouraged to enact policies that hold leaders accountable for their behaviors (Hight et al., 2019) or include a zero-tolerance approach to toxic behaviors (Liu et al., 2012; Walter et al., 2015). Codes of conduct and disciplinary processes to address toxicity are also recommended (Webster et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). Researchers often suggest these measures because a lack of checks and balances within the organizational culture may allow toxic leaders to gain power (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Policies are one of the most commonly recommended interventions in studies on toxic leadership, but there is a lack of research on the

effectiveness of policies on toxic leadership's impacts.

Policies alone are unlikely to curb bad behavior. An organizational culture that ignores policies or fails to hold leaders accountable for adhering to them will counteract any policy implementation aimed at reducing toxic leadership. Policies are only a potentially viable intervention in organizations where they are valued and enforced. Most researchers recommend the implementation of policies in conjunction with other measures such as training and regular assessments of team culture to combat toxic leadership in organizations.

Training

Researchers recommend training as an antidote for toxic leadership. Leader training includes courses that provide basic effective management skills (Hight, 2019; Walter et al., 2015) and a specific emphasis on the negative consequences of toxic leadership behaviors are recommended in several studies (Liu et al., 2012; Walter et al., 2015; Yagil et al., 2011). Training leaders on appropriate interpersonal communication, either through courses focused on effective communication or those on emotional intelligence (Aryee et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2019) may help leaders listen more effectively and provide support to their subordinates. While most researchers recommend broad-based leadership training programs, Harris et al. (2007) recommend targeting training only to those leaders who have exhibited toxic behaviors.

Interestingly, one group of researchers has recommended conducting training for all employees on effective coping strategies to deal with toxicity in the workplace (Webster et al., 2016). The challenge with this approach is it may condone the toxic leadership behaviors. By training subordinates how to deal effectively with toxic leaders,

the root of the problem is not addressed. In addition, given the mixed results on the effectiveness of coping strategies, such training may not lessen the negative impacts of toxic leadership within the organization.

Summary of Recommended Interventions

While research on the effectiveness of interventions is limited, almost every study on forms of toxic leadership include recommendations for combatting toxicity in the leadership ranks. These recommendations include proactive identification of toxic leaders, the implementation of policies, and training on effective leadership practices. These recommendations, if implemented, would be carried out through a partnership between senior leaders and HR.

Summary

The prevalence and negative impacts of toxic leadership (e.g. Aasland et al., 2010) in organizations makes it an important topic area for consideration by researchers, senior leaders, and HR professionals. While researchers have conceptualized toxic leadership in different forms, the underlying traits of toxic leadership, abusive supervision, destructive leadership, narcissism and psychopathy generally overlap (Burns, 2017).

Toxic leadership can lead to numerous negative outcomes, including lower organization commitment, lower job satisfaction, lower job performance, and, ultimately, higher workforce turnover. Employees may attempt to cope with a toxic leader either with active or passive coping mechanisms, but these efforts are often ineffective in offsetting the negative outcomes of the toxicity. By understanding the effects of the toxic leader, which are highly undesirable in any industry, HR professionals may be able to gain senior leadership support to address these issues.

Ultimately, while recommendations for addressing toxic leadership are plentiful, little research exists on the effectiveness of interventions to combat toxic leadership. Most research studies on the topic make recommendations based on the research, which include proactive identification of toxicity, the implementation of policies, and training for leaders. In all of these recommendations, the HR department plays an important role. This is the department responsible for the implementation and enforcement of workforce policies and the department tasked with training leaders. HR professionals can play an important role in identifying toxic leadership behaviors or the associated coping techniques. For organizations aspiring to have effective leaders, as well as strong, sustained employee and organizational performance, rooting out and addressing toxic leadership is a critical step.

Toxic leadership has been studied in many industries and roles over the past two decades. There is a gap in the research related to studying toxic leadership within the HR department. While studying this form of leadership is important in any part of an organization, it may be particularly interesting in the department often charged with addressing its presence. Further, there is a need to better understand toxic leadership from a qualitative standpoint, such that the nuances of the related behaviors can be explored.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

One purpose of this study was to respond to the call from Thoroughgood et al. (2018) for additional qualitative research in the research on toxic leadership. Studying this phenomenon within the HR department allowed for a fresh exploration of the topic. An additional call by Thoroughgood et al. (2018) was to consider context in studies on toxic leadership, which was accomplished through this exploration of toxicity within a specific corporate department. A qualitative study provided deeper insights into the experience of HR professionals who work under toxic leaders, which could also inform future qualitative and quantitative studies. In addition, the coping techniques and perceived impacts of toxic leaders, from the perspective of the follower, was explored.

Research Questions

Given the call for qualitative research (Thoroughgood et al., 2018) and the lack of research on toxic leadership within the HR department, this study targeted to meet both research gaps. By studying the follower's lived experience of toxic leadership within HR, insight was provided into whether this experience is similar to, or different than, the experiences described in other roles. This study might extend the understanding of the overall impacts of toxic leadership from prior research and how it is experienced by the follower. Expanding the views of how toxic leadership impacts employees in the department tasked with addressing toxicity was investigated.

This phenomenological study was aimed at exploring the experiences of HR professionals who work for a toxic HR leader. The research questions posed for this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of HR professionals who work under a toxic

HR leader?

2. Do HR professionals who work under a toxic HR leader perceive any impact to their own performance because of their leader?

Method

Research Design Overview

Phenomenological research is conducted by interviewing several individuals and determining their common experience of a single phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach was proposed for this study because it assists in sense-making of individuals' perceptions (Babbie, 2017). Specifically, a phenomenological approach allows for the study of the essence of a given experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach provided insight into the nuanced emotions, reactions, and experiences of participants, which would not have been feasible utilizing a quantitative approach. This study's results help with our understanding of the lived experience, or essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018), of HR professionals working for a toxic HR leader.

Other qualitative approaches were considered before determining phenomenology was the best approach for this study. In contrast to a narrative study, which would give insight into the detailed experience of one individual, a phenomenological study gives insight into the common experiences of several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study approach would provide a deep understanding of an individual professional's experience, or even that of an intact team (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but would not provide the opportunity to discover common themes from several HR professionals in a similar situation. By comparing the participants' experiences with prior research, there was

consideration of whether there were similarities or differences in their experiences as compared to toxic leadership research done in other fields.

Much of the literature on toxic leadership describes the behaviors of the toxic leader according to a pre-determined list of traits, most frequently those established by Tepper (2000). Such an approach limits the understanding of how the follower would actually describe the leader's behavior without prompts. Researchers are left with a partial understanding of the phenomenon of toxic leadership because potential descriptors may have shifted in the two decades since Tepper's (2000) foundational work was completed and individual followers may perceive their toxic leader's behavior slightly differently than those predetermined statements allow them to express. A phenomenological study provided the framework to see the various shades of experience, from the perspective of the toxic leader's follower.

Participants

Selection of the individuals

I interviewed a total of 12 HR professionals, which is aligned with recommendations by Creswell and Creswell (2018) for phenomenological studies to include between 10 and 15 participants. Each participant needed to have experienced the phenomenon of working for a toxic HR leader, so the call for participants included this criterion. The participants worked in various subfunctions of HR, including recruiting, employee relations, training, and as HR generalists. Participants were solicited through a call for participants through two local HR professional associations: (a) HR Houston and (b) Texas Bay Area SHRM. Three additional HR professional associations were contacted to request a call for participants, but none of them responded. The geographic

location of these associations is in the greater metropolitan area of Houston, Texas. As expected, participants worked primarily in the industries of oil and gas, energy, and healthcare, but specific industries were not solicited or purposely excluded.

Data Collection

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for this study followed the data collection circle outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) and each activity in the circle is described below. Data collection took approximately two months, including participant recruitment and conducting interviews.

Gaining access and developing rapport. Prior to beginning any outreach to potential participants, I secured approval of my study through the Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB utilizes an online system for the submission and tracking of potential studies (CITI & IRB Certification, 2019). Review of this study took several weeks but ultimately the study qualified for exempt status. The IRB approval is included in Appendix F. I then requested partnership from five HR professional associations in Texas and two agreed to put a call out to their members via email to participate in the study. A copy of the emails sent to the professional organizations requesting their cooperation is included in Appendix B. A copy of the call for participants can be found in Appendix C.

All intended participants received an information form electronically with several schedule options for an interview. The information form followed the outline in Creswell and Poth (2018) for consent and included the following information: (a) the study's purpose, (b) participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time, (c) the procedures

to be utilized, (d) how the participants' identities and information will be protected, (e) a statement there are no known risks for participating in the study, and (f) the expected benefits from participation. The outline of study benefits included a better understanding of how HR professionals experience working for a toxic HR leader, which may help organizations better screen out toxic leaders from HR roles. A copy of the information form can be found in Appendix D and the research participant bill of rights is in Appendix E. Since this was an exempt study, participant signatures were not required.

Sampling purposefully. There are various valid purposeful sampling strategies which can be utilized in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, I employed criterion and snowball sampling. Qualitative sampling can occur at the site, event, or process level (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and occurred at the process level for this study. In other words, the conditions for inclusion in the sample were related to having directly experienced toxic leadership from an HR leader and working within an HR department. Criterion sampling allowed for the specific criteria to be specified up-front for potential participants. Snowball sampling was also be utilized, in which each participant was asked whether they knew of any other individuals who may meet the criteria for inclusion in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants knew what type of information was being sought in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and were assumed to be well-positioned to refer other potential participants.

The criteria utilized was that participants work in the field of HR, were over the age of 18, had worked for someone they consider a toxic HR leader in the past five to ten years, and were able to participate in an interview lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. At the end of each interview, the participant was asked whether he or she knew anyone else

who had worked for a toxic HR leader who may be open to participation in the study. While the criterion sampling resulted in twelve eligible participants, as well as some potential participants who self-selected out of the study, the snowball sampling did not result in any recommended participants. None of the participants recommended another person to participate in the study.

The level of sampling for phenomenological research is the individual (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which was the case for this study. The HR professional who works under a toxic HR leader was the unit. As noted previously, between 10 and 15 participants were targeted and 12 individuals agreed to participate in the study. It was initially unclear how difficult it will be to recruit this number of individuals who meet the criteria and were willing to participate, but the participants were all identified within two weeks of the emails from the professional associations calling for participants.

Collecting Data. I collected data via semi-structured interviews using an online video format. The online approach using the program Zoom allowed for easier access to participants as they did not have to travel nor find a confidential place to meet. While I considered an asynchronous online format where participants typed their answers, such as in the qualitative toxic leadership study conducted by Hight et al. (2019), the ability to observe the facial expressions and hear tone in the video format was extremely helpful in providing context during the interviews. In addition, I was able to probe for additional information, as recommended for phenomenology by Creswell and Poth (2018), which an asynchronous format would have made more challenging.

Interviews were conducted at a time of day convenient for each participant. Given the proposed format of the interviews, participants were required to have a computer or

smartphone with a microphone in order to participate in the study. I sent each potential participant an information form, a copy of the research bill of rights, and several options for a day and time to participate. Once the participant agreed on a time, they were sent a unique Zoom link for the interview. At the agreed-upon day and time, I started the interview with a brief personal introduction and an overview of the study prior to interviewing the participants. I also informed them the interview was expected to take between 30 and 45 minutes and the interviews would be audio recorded.

Recording Information. I digitally audio recorded all interviews utilizing a handheld recorder placed close to the computer speaker. I did not video record participants, but I did take notes of any non-verbal reactions to questions or particular topics throughout the interviews. For example, one participant's body language was indicative of feeling defeated as she talked about a loss of confidence when working for a toxic HR leader. Those emotions were not readily evident in the transcription, but I captured the nonverbal emotion as part of the data for analysis. Recordings were transcribed utilizing Rev.com, then I manually reviewed and corrected each transcription against the audio recording.

Data Collection Tool

The data collection tool for this study was an interview questionnaire designed to gather input from participants answering the overall research questions. In order to gain insight on the lived experiences of the participants, questions focused on four subtopics of the primary topic: the lived experiences of HR professionals working under a toxic HR leader. The subtopics and related interview questions were organized from general to more specific, as recommended for qualitative research interviews (Creswell & Poth,

2018). All questions were open-ended with the exception of a few closed-ended demographic questions.

Subtopic One: Description of the Toxic Leader's Behavior. The first subtopic for this study was the description of the toxic leader's behavior. Each participant was asked to describe the toxic HR leader for whom they currently or previously worked. I then compared these descriptions to one another to determine where common themes emerged in the descriptions of the toxic HR leaders. In addition, the descriptions were compared to prior research in toxic leadership to determine what similarities or differences exist in the experience of HR professionals working for a toxic HR leader. A sample interview question for this subtopic was:

1. Tell me about the toxic leader. When did you work for them and for how long?

Subtopic Two: Exposure of the HR Leader to Effective Leadership Practices. In a qualitative study conducted in the hospitality industry, a key explanation for the poor leadership behaviors described by participants was the limited training offered to leaders in that industry (Hight et al., 2019). The opposite may be true for leaders within the HR function. In my experience, HR leaders have exposure to effective leadership practices, processes, and philosophies either through formal education or through workplace training. In fact, HR leaders are often tasked with conducting leadership training for others in the organization. As such, I wanted to explore whether the followers of toxic HR leaders believed those leaders had exposure to effective leadership practices. A related interview question for this subtopic was:

1. What exposure do you believe this leader had to education on effective

leadership?

There was a risk participants would not be able to answer this question. In the case of this study, the results were mixed, such that some participants could answer the question, and some could not. The qualitative study conducted by Hight et al. (2019) asked participants about antecedents to their toxic behavior, so there was some precedent for gathering this information.

Subtopic Three: Perceived Impact on the Performance of the Follower.

Extensive research has measured the negative consequences of toxic leaders on their followers, including subordinates' lower organizational commitment and job satisfaction, along with increases in counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Aryee et al., 2007; Boddy, 2014; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). I explored whether the previously-studied consequences of toxic leadership were experienced by the participating HR followers and whether some were more salient or frequent for these individuals. As this is not a quantitative or experimental study, there were no attributions of cause as a result of the answers to these questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but the insights provided by the participants were helpful to understanding their experience when compared to prior research. A sample interview question for this subtopic was:

1. What were the consequences for you during the time you worked for this leader?

Subtopic Four: Coping Techniques Utilized by the Follower. Several studies have been conducted related to how followers cope with a toxic leader (e.g. Webster et al., 2016; Yagil et al., 2011). In this study, I explored the coping techniques utilized by HR professionals working for a toxic HR leader and compared those responses to one

another and to the prior research. A sample interview question for this subtopic was:

1. How did you cope during the time you worked for this leader?

Interview Protocol. The entire interview protocol is available in Appendix A. In addition to the questions related to each subtopic, participants were asked general information questions on their field of HR and their years of work experience in the field of HR. In addition, probing questions were drafted in advance of the interviews and are included in Appendix A.

Interviews were necessary since many participants recounted experiences with a prior leader, so field observation was not a viable method of data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview protocol questions were developed based on guidance from Jacob and Furgerson (2012) and two qualitative studies on toxic leadership (Hight et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2016). In the study conducted by Webster et al. (2016), the researchers asked participants questions about the behaviors of the leader, the impact of those behaviors on the participant, and the coping mechanism used by the participant. In a later study by Hight et al. (2019), participants were asked about the characteristics of a bad leader and what they believed caused the leader to behave in a toxic manner. The interview protocol for this study incorporated questions related to the leader's behavior, the impact on the participant, and any coping mechanisms used by the follower. The interview protocol was tested during a prior course project and modified slightly to remove questions regarding any attribution the participants could make about the origins of the leaders' toxicity. Both participants in the pilot study indicated this information was unknown to them.

Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative coding guidance from Saldana (2008) and Elliott (2018). I loaded the transcribed interviews into the qualitative data analysis (QDA) program MaxQDA for coding. Each response was first analyzed using open coding to identify key properties in the data. During this phase of the analysis, statements were analyzed, organized, and given a label, resulting in 105 labels. Qualitative researchers often code data from one interview prior to subsequent interviews being conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hight et al., 2019), but that was not possible in this study because many of the interviews were conducted within the same week.

Secondly, codes were grouped into broad categories, based on logical connections between the statements in the interviews. The third stage of analysis involved axial coding, in which the data within each category was analyzed again and re-grouped into themes. Some of the previously identified categories became themes, but in other cases, codes were re-grouped or discarded entirely during this stage. In this final stage of data analysis, I reassessed the groupings of statements from participants to finalize the themes. I also looked for representative quotes or stories from the participants to make the meanings of the themes clearer to the reader.

Once the codes and themes were finalized, the entire list was sent electronically to the participants for member checking to enhance qualitative validity of the analysis. Feedback from the participants on the codes and themes are reported in the results.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were addressed in the course of the current study, including potential psychological harm to participants, the confidentiality of responses, the need to remain objective in a study of toxicity, and researcher bias. The first of these

ethical concerns is the psychological harm which may have been caused by asking individuals to recount the painful experience of working for a toxic leader. I made every effort to make the participants feel comfortable in the interview and reminded them at the beginning of the interview they could withdraw at any time. All participants remained engaged for the duration of their interviews and none stated they were upset by the interview questions or their responses.

Another ethical concern, particularly with the use of a local purposive sample and if the study is ultimately published, is the potential for a toxic leader to identify himself or herself in the quotes of their follower. This could limit the confidentiality for the study's participants. Participants and any individuals they named in their stories were given aliases in all version of the interview transcriptions, but a specific story which is particularly descriptive may reveal the participant if the study were to be published. Most stories were kept general enough to limit the possibility of this confidentiality breach.

An additional consideration was whether it is ethical to study toxic behaviors without intervening. This would have been a more significant problem in a longer-term qualitative study or within an organization in which I held a position of power. I believe the selection of phenomenology as the intended qualitative approach was the best one to minimize this concern given the limited amount of time spent with the participants. Most participants described a former leader, in which case the ability to intervene was eliminated. In an ethnographic, case study, or narrative research approach, the interactions with participants would have spanned a longer period of time (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which may have increased the risks associated with this particular ethical concern.

The final ethical consideration is the balance between my involvement in the study as a qualitative researcher and the bracketing required in a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ensuring my own biases do not compromise the study results was accomplished by a focus on analyzing the collected data. Fischer (2009) noted a researcher cannot fully eliminate his or her opinions and background from qualitative research. It was important to acknowledge my biases up front and consider all data collected (Fischer, 2009), even when the information was different than what I expected to find.

Minimizing Field Issues

Creswell and Poth (2018) outline several considerations related to field research, some of which did not apply to my study. I did not physically go onsite to another organization, nor did I conduct research within my own organization. I did need to secure agreement from two local HR associations to assist me in reaching potential participants, but this was not a major obstacle. I did not foresee an issue with the Creighton University IRB being unfamiliar with qualitative research, as this approach is common and taught in the current program. I did not review existing documents or audiovisual materials from any of the participants, so access to these items was not a factor for this study.

I had to carefully consider the dynamics between me, as the interviewer, and my interviewees. Creswell and Poth (2018) warn researchers must prepare for possibilities such as unexpected behaviors of participants, preparing recording information prior to interviews, and phrasing questions well. I was addressing sensitive issues in this study, so consideration of the discomfort participants may have felt was critical. As a fellow HR professional with prior experience interviewing others, I believe I helped participants feel

comfortable in the discussion, but I had to ensure I was mentally and logistically prepared prior to initiating each interview. I tested my technology and equipment prior to the initiation of the interviews with a colleague to ensure everything was in working order. I did not want to cause undue stress on myself or the participant by struggling to initiate the interview. Even so, two interviews had to be rescheduled after the participants were unsuccessful in joining the initial Zoom meeting. While there has been some discussion of the merits of researchers sharing their own story in an interview, this approach would have interfered with the bracketing process of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and was therefore not included in this study.

Storing Data Securely

Each transcribed file was assigned an alias name and all names mentioned within the participants' stories were altered at the time of transcription. A master list of the aliases was kept in a password-protected file on my personal computer until the end of the project, at which time it will be deleted. The transcriptions themselves were stored on my personal computer, which was password-protected, and the files were also password-protected. I included these privacy protocols in my information form, so participants were aware of them in advance of their participation.

Summary

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to provide insight into the lived experiences of HR professionals who work under a toxic HR leader. Questions were guided utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol which allowed for the flexibility to gather additional insight from participants. Criterion and snowball sampling were utilized, and data collection occurred in a face-to-face video interview format. Each

participant was provided an information form and the research participant bill of rights, both of which outlined the protections in place related to their participation in the study.

Interviews were digitally recorded to allow for verbatim transcription and analysis utilizing the QDA program MaxQDA. Analysis occurred via a three-phase qualitative coding approach after which the major themes were sent to the participants for member checking. Participant data was electronically secured, and aliases were assigned to participants and anyone named during their interview. The risks to research participants were minimal and were controlled for utilizing best practices in conducting interviews and securing data. IRB approval was obtained prior to the initiation of the interviews.

Data collection took approximately two months, as potential participants were identified relatively quickly. Results were compared to prior research to determine similarities and deviations from prior findings in the field of toxic leadership. This was not done to generalize the results, which is not the aim of qualitative research, but rather to better understand the nuances of these results in the context of the body of research on toxic leadership. Study results were analyzed to recommend criteria for assessing potential HR leaders to avoid toxicity in that leadership role.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological dissertation in practice study was to describe the lived experience of HR professionals in various industries who work for a toxic HR leader. Secondly, the study explored whether these individuals perceived any impact to their performance as a result of working for their leader. Additionally, this study aimed to explore these HR professionals' perceptions and meaning of toxic leadership in their particular context, along with how they coped. This chapter presents the phenomenological findings of this research.

All participants were provided an alias in order to protect their identity. In addition, any stories that included proper names were also altered with aliases. Participants came from several industries and subfunctions within HR, as shown in Table 1. As expected, given the geographic location of the study in southeast Texas, most participants came from the oil and gas, energy, or healthcare industries. Overall, participants expressed their experience of working for a toxic leader utilizing pain-filled language such as "stressful," "upsetting," and "traumatic." The description of the leaders' behaviors aligned with prior research as manipulative, controlling, incompetent, belittling/demeaning, and self-serving. In outlining their coping techniques, participants described both passive techniques, such as shifting focus from their leader to their work, and active techniques, such as seeking social support and leaving the organization. In addition to describing the impacts of the toxic leader to their work performance, participants expressed effects on other parts of their life, including their career and their emotional and physical well-being. These effects lasted beyond the time the participants worked for the toxic leader.

Table 1*Participants' demographics*

Participant	Industry	Subspecialty of HR	Total Years of HR Experience	Direct or Indirect Report of Toxic Leader
Barbara	Oil & gas	Communications	22	Direct
David	Oil & gas	Training	20	Indirect
Felicia	Oil & gas	Recruiting	20	Indirect
James	Energy	Employee Relations	25	Direct
Jennifer	Manufacturing	Recruiting	20	Indirect
Kelly	Oil & gas	Generalist	20	Direct
Kristin	Oil & gas	Generalist	10	Indirect
Laura	Retail	Generalist	22	Direct
Leslie	Healthcare	Generalist	10	Indirect
Sandra	Legal	Labor Law	5	Direct
Sarah	Energy Healthcare &	Generalist	19	Direct
Virginia	Manufacturing	Employee Relations	10	Direct

Results

The data analysis revealed seven themes, based both on the participants' descriptions of their experiences and my reflection and interpretation of the experiences

the participants shared. The seven themes are as follows:

Theme 1: The toxic HR leader was manipulative, controlling, and demeaning.

Theme 2: The toxic HR leader was incompetent and self-serving, and therefore did not match participants' expectations of an HR leader.

Theme 3: The toxic HR leader also displayed some positive traits, such as intelligence or kindness.

Theme 4: Various coping techniques were utilized by HR professionals when working for a toxic HR leader, including trying to explain the leader's behavior.

Theme 5: Working for a toxic HR leader impacted followers' work performance, lowered their confidence, and took an emotional and physical toll.

Theme 6: The experience of working for the toxic HR leader had negative consequences after the experience ended, but participants ultimately felt they were in a better place.

Theme 7: Others in the organization were complicit in the leader's toxic behaviors or their retention of a leadership role. Senior leaders were often blind to the toxic behavior.

A table of the themes, related codes, and representative quotes which can be found in Appendix G was utilized for member checking, and no adjustments were made based on participants' feedback. Seven of the twelve participants responded with comments as part of the member checking process. Each theme is described in detail, along with a comparison to prior research.

Theme 1: The Toxic HR Leader Was Manipulative, Controlling, and Demeaning

In describing their toxic HR leaders' behaviors, participants gave multiple

descriptors which align with prior research on toxic leadership. All twelve participants expressed their toxic HR leader displayed behaviors which were manipulative, controlling, or demeaning as experienced by the subordinate. The participants also felt the leader's behavior was intentional, which Hight et al. (2019) notes is a defining attribute of toxic leadership.

Manipulative

Prior research has noted manipulation as an element of toxic leadership (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). In one qualitative study, researchers found toxic leaders used manipulation as a means of control (Bourdoux & Delabelle, 2013). Kilduff et al. (2010) also found toxic leaders utilize manipulation as a form of emotional control or as a tool for self-promotion. Participants described their leaders as manipulating others through the use of specific behaviors. Several of the participants described leaders who utilized information to manipulate others, through lying or withholding information. Leslie utilized the word "dishonesty" when describing of her leader that there were "things she would say in one room and would say the complete opposite in another." Sandra describes her toxic HR leader as "very good at" lying, and she would "tell a story in a completely different way than anyone remembered it." She recounts her leader would then end a call or meeting and turn to her team to say "Well, I think that went well. Do you think they bought it?" Toxic HR leaders also withheld information, such as a situation Barbara described in which she was put in charge of a major project but told she could not have any of the information required to complete the project or communicate it to others. Kristin noted her leader "just refused to share information that was important for us to make decisions that we

needed to make.”

Manipulation was also present in leaders ignoring or isolating their subordinates, which was described by four of the participants, and is a form of nonverbal toxic behavior (Ayree et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2007). Jennifer noted one toxic HR leader she worked with would “totally ignore me.” Even when she directly addressed him, he would “not look up and not say a word.” Laura described a leader who not only ignored her own team members, but would also not speak to employees outside of the HR team. Barbara stated she was “getting isolated by the VP of HR.”

The third manifestation of manipulation was presented in the form of manipulating relationships or perceptions of others in the workplace. In some instances, the toxic HR leader pitted their own employees against one another, and in other situations, the leader spoke poorly of other leaders in the company. David noted the HR Director he worked with “was trying to put a wedge between me and her staff.” He said there was “no problem between the two of us, but she was trying... or we felt like she was trying to make it that way.” Toxic leadership has been shown to impact team-role performance, or the cooperation amongst team members (Farh & Chen, 2014). Several participants described situations in which the leader told the participant that colleagues made negative comments about them, but when the participant followed up, they found this was not the case. Virginia noted her leader, who she described as “mostly good” created a situation with a colleague where they were “constantly competing against one another.”

Controlling

Controlling behaviors were described by eight of the participants. One of the

primary ways the described toxic HR leaders were controlling was by not wanting others in the organization to seek out or praise their employees. David described a project he worked on for which he “received a lot of praise and recognition” and noted the response from the toxic HR leader was the praise he received “upset her for some reason.” Sandra had a similar experience in which her leader would be “noticeably more bristly” toward HR team members who received a compliment from others in the company. Kristin worked in an open office and noted her toxic HR leader would often insert herself in conversations with managers and “backtrack everything we’d already told this manager and give them a totally different answer.”

Toxic HR leaders were also controlling in requiring team members to copy them on every email sent to others or “demanding respect from people.” This led to altered team dynamics, including one in which “everyone was compliant because they didn’t want to bear her wrath.” Sandra noted her leader was involved in everything happening within the company such that “you couldn’t sneeze in that building without her being involved in it.” Aggressive eye contact has also been noted as a nonverbal toxic leadership behavior (Aryee et al., 2007), which was reported by Laura who said her leader “could just look at you and you knew you better not say anything.” Some of the controlling behaviors were subtle, but in Sarah’s case, the leader was explicit and would reportedly say “I don’t pay you to think. I need you to do what I say.”

Demeaning

Six of the participants provided examples of demeaning or belittling behavior by their toxic HR leader, one of whom specifically said of her leader, “she would say things that were demeaning and belittling.” James described a toxic HR leader who made

people feel “less than” and could be heard “pretty easily telling you that that’s a stupid thing to think or a stupid way to think.” Others described leaders who would “scold people in front of the whole team” or “yelled at me in front of everybody.” In Laura’s case, this behavior was not limited to members of the HR team, as her toxic HR leader called a director in another department “stupid” and made employees and leaders feel incompetent when they came to her for assistance. Public humiliation has been noted as an element of toxic leadership in prior studies (Harris et al., 2007; Hight et al., 2019).

Five participants also described overly critical feedback on their own or other team members’ work. James summarized this behavior when he said, “I watched her take other people apart.” Many of the participants described this feedback as inconsistent with feedback they had received in previous jobs or concurrently from others in the organization. Felicia noted she would receive positive feedback from others about her work, then her leader would state, “This is not satisfactory. This does not live up to my standards. This is not how this should be done.” While providing performance feedback is important for any professional, statements such as these were found to be so negative and lacking in constructive guidance participants described feeling confused and angry.

Some of the belittling behaviors described by participants were nonverbal, which has also been found in prior research (Aryee et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2007). James described a situation in which he watched his leader grab an employee’s phone and slammed it down on the table in the middle of a meeting. Kristin stated if her leader “didn’t like what you were saying, she would put her hand in front of your face to silence you” or leave the room in the middle of the conversation.

Theme 2: The Toxic HR Leader Was Incompetent and Self-serving, and Therefore Did Not Match Participants' Expectations of an HR Leader

Incompetence and a self-serving nature were two additional descriptive categories described by participants, some of whom then equated those descriptions as incongruous specifically with an HR leader. Incompetence manifested itself in either a general lack of knowledge or in a mishandling of HR tasks. Leaders described as self-serving were particularly offensive to some of the participants.

Incompetence

General incompetence was described by several participants, including one leader who “was not competent in HR or basic office skills.” Other leaders would hold ineffective meetings or fail to discuss concerns with team members. Barbara described her leader as “not a very good, effective leader over her team.” David stated his leader was “resistant to change when she was supposed to be a change agent.”

One of the primary ways the toxic HR leaders were considered incompetent was in their mishandling of HR tasks. Barbara described a situation in which leaders were not conducting performance reviews, which was a required process within the organization. When she approached her leader about the issue, the leader told her it was “not a big deal.” The same leader gave a similar response after an accusation of sexual harassment was reported. In both cases, Barbara was incredulous an HR leader would ignore obvious violations of policy. Kelly tells the story of an HR team member who was terminated for cause but allowed to return shortly after. Her leader refused to talk to the team about the matter and left the team feeling like “he’s coming back, and we all have to accept it.” Leslie described the mishandling of investigations within the HR department in which the

leader was “spreading rumors and gossip but never going to the actual source.”

Self-Serving

Eight participants described their toxic HR leader as self-serving, which is a core behavioral component of toxic leadership or narcissism in prior studies (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Erickson et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2016). Sarah notes a lack of recognition for the team’s work and an unwillingness by her leader to gather input from others. This was an example of self-serving behavior. She states, “We weren’t even asked what did we think could be better, what did we want to do, what were we hoping for, none of that.” In her opinion, this approach did not match her perceptions of a “transformational HR” leader, who should be focused on listening and building relationships. One leader was described as “a bit pretentious” and another was “only worried about their agenda, not who it was going to hurt in the long run.” Kristin’s leader would walk out of the room if “the conversation wasn’t going where she wanted it to.” The toxic HR leader James worked for “raised her voice beyond anybody’s comfort level and essentially threatened to quit” in a senior leader meeting.

A few participants specifically noted being self-serving did not match their perceptions of good HR leadership. Jennifer probably said it the most clearly when she stated, “In HR, being self-serving, I mean, that’s probably one of the biggest no-no’s, and that should be a knockout. Especially an HR leader. You just can’t be self-serving.” Laura also noted a similar sentiment when describing her leader as not being approachable for frontline employees. She goes on to state her leader was “a prime picture of what not-HR-friendly is supposed to look like.”

Theme 3: The Toxic HR Leader Also Displayed Some Positive Traits, Such As Intelligence or Kindness

Aasland et al. (2010) noted toxic leadership behaviors often coexist with more positive leadership behaviors, and this was experienced by many of the participants in this study as well. Half of the participants stated their leader was not all bad. Virginia described two prior leaders with toxic behaviors, and noted one was “very supportive” and the other was “great” and “so willing to teach.” Laura’s toxic HR leader was seen as “very knowledgeable” and a “subject matter expert” in topics outside of core HR. James described his leader as “incredibly bright” and feels she taught him much of the substantive knowledge he has of employee relations, after he moved to HR from another department.

In some cases, this dichotomy of behaviors was confusing for subordinates. Kelly described the changes in her leader’s behaviors as “weird” and Felicia said she felt like she was “dealing with a Jekyll and Hyde personality.” Felicia also noted she would receive praise and punishment for doing what she perceived to be the same level of work at different times. In this way, the mix of positive and negative behaviors may have been another form of manipulation.

Theme 4: Various Coping Techniques Were Utilized by HR Professionals When Working for a Toxic HR Leader, Including Trying to Explain the Leader’s Behavior

The participants utilized both passive and active coping techniques during the time they worked for the toxic HR leader. Passive coping included focusing on work and accepting the situation, while active coping was much more varied. Participants described

seeking social support both inside and outside the company, confronting the behavior, and resigning or moving out of the department. Interestingly, several participants tried to explain the leader's toxic behavior without specific prompting to do so. Most participants described the use of multiple coping techniques.

Passive Coping

Nine participants reported utilizing some form of passive coping technique while working for the toxic HR leader. Some accepted the situation and just "dealt with it" or "tried to kind of stick it out." Sandra noted sometimes "you have to adjust to their crazy" in describing working with a toxic leader. Felicia said she "tried to come to terms with the situation" and "just make the best of it at the time."

Focusing on the work was frequently cited as a coping technique by the participants and has been found in prior studies as well (Saqib & Arif, 2017). In considering how she coped while working for a toxic HR leader, Jennifer said, "I worked with the managers. I did what I needed to do." Felicia noted she "really just tried to stay focused on my responsibilities and tasks." Kelly found outlets in other parts of the organization, including a team which specifically focused on employee engagement. She stated working on "fun stuff" was "life-giving" and allowed her an escape from the toxic HR leader. Leslie said she "kind of stayed heads down" to focus on what she could do in her role. While the participants did not explicitly state they were avoiding the toxic HR leader by staying focused on their work, this may have been a form of avoidance coping, which is commonly utilized to cope with a toxic leader (Webster et al., 2016; Yagil et al., 2011). Some prior researchers have indicated focusing on work may be an active coping strategy aimed at improving the toxic leader's perception of the subordinate

(Nandkeolyar et al., 2013). In the current study, focusing on work was not described in this way by the participants. The participants described focusing on their work as an escape from the leader, not an ingratiation tool.

Active Coping

Participants described utilizing multiple active coping techniques, which included the following: seeking support, leaving the work relationship, and confronting the behavior. The latter proved to be the most challenging action for some. Participants also tried to explain the leader's behavior, which is not a coping technique noted in prior research.

Seeking Support. Seeking support involves talking to coworkers or personal relations about the toxic leader and his or her impact on one's own well-being (Yagil et al., 2011). Half of the participants sought support either within the organization or through personal relationships. Kristin said she and her peers would talk about the toxic leader over lunch and Leslie said she had coworkers she trusted and could talk to about the leader. Sarah indicated seeking support helped her team fill in missing information by stating, "we talked to each other because no one was talking to us." Other participants described spending time with family as a helpful coping technique. Felicia said, "I would talk to my sister and talk to my best friend. You know, vent to them, talk it through, try to come to terms with the situation that I was in." Prior research has shown the utilization of seeking support as a coping mechanism may actually worsen distress because it increases the amount of time the subordinate spends ruminating on the toxic leader (Yagil et al., 2011). In the current study, seeking support was described as helpful by the participants in this study.

Leaving the Work Relationship. Several participants stated they left the organization or department as a result of working for the toxic HR leader, which is a common form of coping (Webster et al., 2016). Sarah says, “I probably worked for them for, it wasn’t even a year, honestly, because I left the company because of them.” In one situation, a participant quit without another job secured, stating, “so that’s how bad it got, to the point of either you leave this organization or you’re going to be a basket case.” Another participant accepted a role she “wasn’t even really excited about” because she felt she “needed to be delivered from this horrible situation.” In addition to employees resigning, several noted the leader caused others in the department to resign. Lambert et al. (2015) found when toxic leadership lowers organizational commitment, employees may be more likely to leave the organization. Similar results have been found in other studies (Tepper, 2000).

Confronting or Reporting the Behavior. Five participants made attempts to confront the leader directly about their behavior. Those who confronted the toxic HR leader did so respectfully, often by suggesting other ways to approach specific situations. Kristin notes she brought up her concerns to her leader “very professionally” and saw some improvement:

I do think that toward the end of our time together, she was trying to improve some things. Obviously, I didn’t expect her to totally change overnight but I do think that she... I don’t know that anyone had ever come forward with her before. Another participant was entrusted with debriefing his leader on her 360 feedback results and utilized those results to communicate to the leader she “intimidated everybody” and “came off almost as arrogant and judgmental,” but described the toxic HR leader as

ultimately disregarding the feedback.

Other participants feared providing the leader feedback due to retaliation or not feeling as though they had anyone to whom they could report the behavior. Kristin stated, “And so when you’re in HR, you don’t have anywhere to go, because the person that’s causing the problem is the person that you’d normally report it to.” Considering the matter more broadly, Felicia noted, “I think that as professionals in human resources, we’re less likely to speak up about these sorts of things than anyone else.” Fear of retaliation or confronting the leader is likely not unique to the HR function, but participants felt they had fewer avenues to report the behavior because they worked in the department charged with taking in these types of complaints.

Explaining the Behavior. Without specifically being asked to do so, several participants attempted to explain the reasons for the leader’s toxic behavior. Sandra stated, “I spent a lot of time trying to figure her out. And I still kind of do that. Like, what is motivating this person?” Five participants believed the toxic leader was insecure, which contributed to their behaviors. Two participants believed a lack of children contributed to self-centered behaviors and James felt his toxic leader was compensating for being the only female vice president in the organization. While several participants attempted to explain the behavior, this was not universal. Jennifer simply stated, “I don’t know what his motivation was.”

Theme 5: Working for a Toxic HR Leader Impacted Followers’ Work Performance, Lowered Their Confidence, and Took an Emotional and Physical Toll.

Participants perceived decreased work performance, decreased confidence, and negative emotional and physical outcomes as a result of working for a toxic HR leader.

Impacts to their work performance included such aspects as being told to lower their performance, wasting time, making the job harder than it needed to be, and making the subordinate a worse leader for their team. Emotional and physical outcomes ranged from depression and anxiety to making the subordinate feel crazy.

Perceived Impacts to Work Performance

Prior research has found a negative relationship between the presence of toxic leadership and subordinate's work performance (Chen & Wang, 2017; Farh & Chen, 2014; Harris et al., 2007). Ten of the participants described negative consequences to their work performance during the time they reported to a toxic HR leader. Participants described decreased work performance as feeling they were not making meaningful contributions to the organization. Barbara describes a situation in which the Vice President of HR told her "you need to do less" and David said, "some days I feel guilty even taking a paycheck from them because there's so much more that we could be doing." An inability or unwillingness to exert additional effort is an indication of lower organizational commitment, which is an outcome of toxic leadership (Lambert et al., 2015).

Two toxic leaders were described as making work more inefficient for subordinates because they were unapproachable to staff members. Laura described, "they'll go all around her as a resource to try to find answers... because they're trying to avoid her, which adds waste." Other participants described a lack of support for their work. Virginia felt her toxic leader's behaviors made her a worse leader to her own team. She stated, "sometimes I feel like whenever I'm leaving her office, then that kind of translates to whatever I'm dealing with my employees on so I don't like that" and "I see

it spread to how I communicate with my team.”

Decreased Confidence

Webster et al. (2016) found a loss of confidence to be the most prevalent psychological effect of toxic leadership in their study. While only four participants specifically discussed decreased confidence as a result of working for a toxic HR leader, their descriptions were detailed and consistent. Laura was told by her leader to look for a job in another field and described “to slowly lose that confidence that you have, what you worked so hard in college for, staying up nights to get your degree.” She goes on to note she believes this consequence was intentional when she said, “I think her leadership style was truly attempting to diminish my confidence,” which is consistent with the definition of toxic leadership as a pattern of premeditated behaviors (Hight et al., 2019). Virginia said confidence has continued to be a challenge for her in subsequent roles by stating, “I feel like I’ve taken a step back in some aspects in terms of what I’ve learned.” A negative relationship between self-efficacy and toxic leadership has been found in at least one other study (Chen & Wang, 2017).

Emotional and Physical Toll

Boddy (2014) states increased anxiety and decreased affective well-being, defined as a state of contentment, are both associated with the presence of toxic leadership. The emotional and physical toll experienced by the participants during the time they worked for a toxic HR leader was described as “really upsetting,” “traumatic,” “horrible,” and “very stressful.” Two participants stated they were depressed, and one admitted to taking anti-depressants during this period. Another participant was seeing a therapist during the time she worked for a toxic HR leader. Sarah stated she was not sleeping. Participants

also noted impacts to their self-esteem, feeling “defeated” or “embarrassed” and being made to feel “delusional.” Three participants talked about dreading going to work. Laura summed up the emotional toll with her statement, “it was a lot of emotional damage from having that one bad leader.”

Theme 6: The Experience of Working for the Toxic HR Leader Had Negative Consequences After the Experience Ended, but Participants Ultimately Felt They Were in a Better Place.

Some of the negative impact of working for a toxic HR leader continued beyond the end of the work relationship. Kelly stated “I still felt like, almost, PTSD from the whole experience” while two others describe “walking on eggshells” in their next job. Kristin described:

I’m still kind of having some backlash from it personally and at work, where I worked in that environment for so long that I kind of, I don’t know, automatically think in that way where I feel like, with my new director, even though she’s a totally different person, I still kind of have that instinct to kind of protect myself a little bit from some negative behavior. Even though I know it’s not there.

She goes on later to summarize there are “still some lingering effects” of working for a toxic HR leader.

Four participants felt they experienced limits to their career growth as a result of their experience working for a toxic HR leader. Jennifer tells the story of a senior HR leader attempting to block a career move she was promised in her offer letter because the leader “didn’t like that business unit.” Others describe more general impacts such as “stunted” or “stifled” growth within the organization and in their career. Leslie directly

asked her toxic HR leader why she was not providing support and stated the leader “couldn’t articulate that because it was part of her own agenda.”

Ultimately, however, participants felt they ended up in a better situation and many described personal growth and self-discovery. David said, “I ended up with a better job, so it was a good experience being let go,” which was a sentiment shared by several other participants. Many also felt they learned about themselves, including Felicia, who stated, “it gave me a much greater appreciation for being seen for my worth.” Kelly described utilizing the time after leaving the organization to create a “vision board” to clarify her next steps.

Participants also described learning about how they wanted to lead in the future. James attributed his knowledge in employee relations to working for a toxic HR leader, but also noted he learned how not to lead: “almost everything she did, behaviorally, I decided I would do the opposite.” Sandra said:

The next job I took after that, because I was in a managerial role, I always thought of her. I always, before I did anything, I thought ‘Is this something she would do?’ Because I don’t want to if it’s something she would do.

In this way, the participants remained hopeful about their future and described learning from their experience. Lipman-Blumen (2005) points out toxic leaders leave followers worse off than they were before. While this proved to be somewhat true for the participants of this study, it was not entirely the case.

Theme 7: Others in the Organization Were Complicit in the Leader’s Toxic Behaviors or Their Retention of a Leadership Role. Senior Leaders Were Often Blind to the Toxic Behavior.

Thoroughgood et al. (2018) stated the environment in which toxic behaviors are allowed is critical for them to continue and half of the participants in the current study specified the leader's toxic behavior was well-known in the organization. James noted his leader's behaviors had been "rewarded all the way through her career, so she continued that way." Several participants also indicated they could have talked to a more senior leader, but the more senior individual either had a strong relationship with the toxic HR leader or would not have understood the feedback. David noted his toxic leader "could do just about anything" because "her and the CEO were just tight." Similarly, Felicia said her company's president was her toxic leader's "biggest supporter" and "they worked hand in hand on many things." Others did not believe their senior leader would heed their warnings, including Kristin who believed her CEO "was so far removed from the situation that it would have really been a stretch for him to really understand what we were talking about."

Discussion

Toxic leadership is harmful (Erickson et al., 2015; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Webster et al, 2016) and intentional (Hight et al., 2019; Lipman-Blumen, 2005) as perceived by the subordinate (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Overall, the participants in this study described their experiences working for a toxic HR leader in great detail, even when those experiences occurred several years in the past. Many of their descriptions, such as a leader who is controlling, manipulative, and self-serving, are reflective of the descriptions of toxic leaders in prior research (e.g. Harris et al., Tepper, 2000). Given the overlap in their descriptions, the participants did experience toxic leadership as previously defined. While prior research on the existence of toxic leadership in HR is

extremely limited, this study indicates this form of leadership does at least partially manifest itself within the HR department. While some toxic behaviors outlined by Lipman-Blumen (2005), such as leading followers to believe the leader is the only one that can save them, did not surface in the participant interviews, many other toxic leader behaviors were present. The ease with which twelve willing participants were identified, along with a handful of others who could not be scheduled for interviews for various reasons, could be classified as disturbing. While this study cannot be construed to indicate the prevalence of this phenomenon in HR departments, such a study might be warranted.

Employees working in an HR department under a toxic leader may perceive the existence of toxic leadership within HR as somehow worse than if it exists elsewhere in the company. The participating HR professionals appeared to hold the leaders within their department to a higher standard than those in other departments. The fairness of such an expectation could be debated, but given the volume of recommendations for HR to be involved in rooting out and addressing toxic leadership elsewhere in an organization (Hight et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2012; Walter et al., 2015), its presence within the HR department is problematic. Further, the participants felt they lacked recourse for addressing the toxic leadership, both because their own department was no longer a reporting avenue and because the leader had support from executives higher in the organization. Reporting the behavior is a common coping technique for subordinates of toxic leaders (Webster et al., 2016), but may be less common among HR team members experiencing this phenomenon.

Participants described negative personal and professional effects from working

for a toxic HR leader, both concurrently during the time they worked for the individual, and after. They described impacts to their ability to effectively do their work, as well as physical and psychological impacts, which could also impact work performance (Tepper, 2000). The effects described were aligned with prior research on toxic leadership, but most studies on the subject have measured performance from the perspective of the leader (Harris et al., 2007; Walter et al., 2015), not the subordinate. Considering negative performance effects from the perspective of the follower might be more impactful as most employees may be reluctant to admit their performance was below expectations.

Employees continued to feel impacted by their experience of working for a toxic leader after the relationship ended, through limits in their career growth and a need to behave in a self-protective manner with future leaders. Even so, every participant felt they were in a better place emotionally and professionally after the experience. While this provides hope for followers of toxic HR leaders, participants described feeling better sometime after leaving the organization where they experienced the toxic HR leader. This is problematic for organizational leaders who wish to retain their HR talent but fail to address toxic leaders within this department.

Various coping techniques were utilized by the participants, and each participant reported coping in more than one way, which is consistent with prior research (Yagil et al., 2011). Both passive and active coping techniques were utilized, and several participants tried to explain why the toxic HR leader behaved the way they did. This coping technique could be a form of reframing, but it is manifested differently than described in the studies by Webster et al. (2016) and Yagil et al. (2011). In both of those studies, this coping technique was utilized by subordinates to reframe their own emotions

about the leader's behavior. In the current study, the participants seemed to utilize explanation to reframe their understanding of the motivations for the toxic leader's behavior. This could be due to the role HR professionals often take in considering both sides of a conflict or explaining behavior elsewhere in the organization. The participants did not indicate, however, that their suppositions made the behavior acceptable, only that they sought an explanation for the behavior.

In contrast to a recent qualitative study by Hight et al. (2019), in which participants found a lack of training to contribute to toxic leadership behaviors in the hospitality industry, it was believed participants in this study would indicate their toxic HR leader behaved badly in spite of prior leadership training. This was not found to be true across all interviews in this study. While some participants were positive their leader had prior exposure to effective leadership training and practices, most were either unsure or were confident the leader did not have such training. This did not lessen their expectation of the leader to act differently, but it does make unclear why this behavioral expectation exists.

In one prior study, the researchers found hospitality employees believed their leaders' toxicity was partially due to a lack of leadership training (Hight et al., 2019). HR professionals are often charged with training others on leadership, so there was some assumption the opposite may be true. While the question regarding knowledge of the toxic HR leader's prior education about or exposure to good leadership practices was explored in the interviews, the participants' responses were inconsistent. Some participants were confident the leader had such exposure and others were unsure, so this inquiry did not result in a theme for this research study.

Summary

A phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of HR professionals working for a toxic HR leader. In this chapter, the results of interviews with twelve HR professionals with toxic HR leaders were presented. The participants worked in multiple industries in various areas of HR and had both direct and indirect reporting relationships to the toxic leader. Through the use of in-depth coding and analysis of interview transcripts, seven major themes were identified. These themes provide insight into the lived experiences of twelve HR professionals in southeast Texas who worked for a toxic HR leader. The resultant themes were (1) the toxic HR leader was manipulative, controlling, and demeaning, (2) the toxic HR leader was incompetent and self-serving, and therefore did not match participants' expectations of an HR leader, (3) the toxic HR leader also displayed some positive traits, including intelligence and kindness, (4) various coping techniques were utilized by HR professionals when working for a toxic HR leader, including trying to explain the leader's behavior, (5) working for a toxic HR leader impacted followers' work performance, lowered their confidence, and took an emotional and physical toll, (6) the experience of working for the toxic HR leader had negative consequences after the experience ended, but participants ultimately felt they were in a better place, and (7) others in the organization were complicit in the leader's toxic behaviors or their retention of a leadership role; senior leaders were often blind to the toxic behavior. These themes will be incorporated into a proposed solution for leaders wishing to avoid the hiring or promotion of a toxic leader in their HR department, which will be included in the next and final chapter, along with recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Toxic leadership is harmful to followers (e.g. Lambert et al., 2015; Lipman-Blumen, 2005) and organizations (e.g. Aasland et al., 2010; Hight et al., 2019).

Researchers often recommend interventions for toxic leadership which are to be implemented, at least in part, by members of the HR department. There is a paucity of research on the presence of toxic leadership within the HR department, which the current study explored utilizing a phenomenological approach. This final chapter will address the study's intended aim by recommending an interview guide as a potential solution to address toxic leadership in HR. Recommendations and challenges for implementing this solution, along with a discussion of practical, research-related, and leadership-related implications, are also addressed.

Aim Statement

The aim of this study was to provide criteria against which to assess potential HR leaders, specifically to avoid hiring toxic leaders within this department. The negative consequences of toxic leadership indicate this is an important endeavor in any department within an organization, such as finance, sales, and HR. Much of the literature recommends HR involvement in addressing toxic leadership through interventions such as training, policy creation, and pre-hire leader screening (Aryee et al., 2007; Boddy, 2014; Goldman, 2008), so minimizing the presence and possible influence of toxicity in the HR department is critical. Providing criteria or guidance for removing existing toxic leaders from an HR department was outside of the scope of this study.

Proposed Solution

A job interview framework for HR leaders has been created, based on the data

which emerged from the interviews in the current phenomenological study. This framework includes specific interview questions related to individual themes from the current study and interview process recommendations based on prior research. The framework can be used by Chief Executive Officers or other leaders when hiring a head of HR, or by senior HR leaders to screen subordinate leadership candidates for their teams.

The interview guide is displayed in Appendix H. In addition to interview questions and response indicators that are toxic or non-toxic, interview guidelines are included to minimize deception in the interview process, which may be of particular concern given the perceptions of manipulative behavior by the participants in the current study.

Outlining the Purpose

The interview guide begins with an overview of the study's findings in a manner that is concise and compelling for potential interviewers of HR leaders. The purpose of this section of the guide is to orient the user to the reason the guide was created. A summary of key findings from the current study is listed, along with a statement that utilization of a screening tool can help organizations avoid hiring or promoting toxic leaders in their HR departments.

Interview Protocols

According to study participants, toxic HR leaders utilize manipulation in their interactions with others. Selection interviews must therefore incorporate ways to identify the use of deception by prospective HR leadership candidates. Findings from prior research on deceptive interview tactics and truth telling are incorporated into the

proposed interview process. Interviews should be conducted in panels made up of intact teams versus a random assignment of interviewers because intact teams are more accurate in detecting deception during interviews (McHaney et al., 2018). Researchers also recommend interviewers pay attention to nonverbal cues which may indicate deception or manipulation (DeGroot & Gooty, 2009) such as a lack of pauses in speech or limited smiling (Schneider et al., 2015). The interview guide includes a recommendation to have one panelist assigned to monitor body language and nonverbal communication during the interviews.

Longer interviews are associated with more honesty by candidates (Bourdage et al., 2018; Levashina et al., 2014), so interviewers should take their time in evaluating HR leaders. Selection interviews should each be at least an hour in length, particularly when utilizing a panel, in order to allow enough time for the interviewers to ask questions, assess answers, and provide the candidate with information about the company and role. This amount of time may also allow interviewers to ask a few questions from the guide, along with probing questions, without feeling rushed through the interview meeting.

A thorough background check and confirmation of prior HR experience are both critical (Bourdage et al., 2018) in the selection process. In addition to confirming job-related knowledge and experience, these steps can also reduce potential deception by candidates, as less-experienced candidates have been found to utilize deception more in interviews than more-experienced ones (Bourdage et al., 2018).

Candidates also tend to be more honest when interviewing with a knowledgeable hiring manager (Bourdage et al., 2018). This may be challenging when a non-HR leader, such as a CEO or CFO, is interviewing candidates for the head of HR. While these

leaders can screen the candidates on business acumen and general leadership principles, they may be challenged to critically assess a candidate's HR expertise. Participants in the current study expressed a lack of HR expertise was one of the features of the toxic HR leaders for whom they had worked. In these cases, the leader may want to consider including a trusted HR executive from another company or a former HR executive from the Board of Directors in the interview process.

Interview Questions

Structured interviews are more highly related to job performance than interviews without structure, such as those in which the interviewer has no prepared questions (DeGroot & Gooty, 2009). For this reason, a structured interview guide with sample questions is recommended. This will allow interviewers to screen for leadership effectiveness when considering candidates for HR leadership roles. Sample interview questions were developed for six of the seven themes from the current study and are listed in the guide in the Appendix H. The only theme excluded from the interview guide is the theme related to toxic HR leaders who also exhibited positive behaviors. Toxic HR leadership candidates may display both positive and toxic behaviors, but this theme did not result in specific job interview questions. The sample questions are based on participants' stories and both positive (non-toxic) and negative (toxic) answer indicators are included in the guide. For example, one question for Theme 1: the toxic HR leader was manipulative, controlling, and demeaning is:

What would you do if a team member gave different advice to a leader than the advice you would have given?

This question reflects specific controlling behavior described by participants in which the

toxic HR leader would publicly undermine or embarrass them in front of a leader. Negative answer indicators include requiring involvement in all of their subordinates' communications and immediately addressing any inconsistencies with a leader. In contrast, positive answer indicators in an interview may include that the candidate asks questions of team members and speaks to them privately when there is a disagreement.

A combination of both past-behavioral and situational questions is included in the guide. Past-behavioral questions ask a candidate to describe how they have handled a specific situation in the past. Situational questions ask a candidate to consider what they might do in a hypothetical scenario. A combination of both question types has been shown to increase validity of selection interviews (Levashina et al., 2014). In addition, probing questions may decrease deception in interviews, but only when probing is pre-planned and is focused on verifying and quantifying answers (Levashina et al., 2014). Potential probing questions should be outlined prior to beginning the interview. A few sample general and specific probing questions are included in the interview guide.

Evidence that Supports the Solution

Researchers in toxic leadership note it can be difficult to identify (Babiak & Hare, 2006) or rehabilitate a toxic leader already in power (Kets de Vries, 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Often the primary remediation action for a toxic leader is to remove them from their leadership role entirely, which can be costly and uncomfortable for the senior leader. For these reasons, an interview guide is recommended so toxic leaders can be avoided before hire or promotion.

Each theme is reflected in the proposed interview guide and specific scenarios described by participants are reflected in both the sample interview questions and the

answer indicators. Prior research has found leadership interviews too often focus only on the tactical aspects of the job and fail to incorporate questions about leadership capability (Moss & Daunton, 2006). This interview guide allows hiring leaders to continue to ask standard interview questions regarding HR expertise and experience while also asking questions that should aid in avoiding the selection of a toxic leader.

Evidence that Challenges the Solution

Highly skilled manipulators may still be able to convince interviewers they are not toxic leaders, even if the steps outlined in the proposed interview guide are followed. Prior research has shown people with more credibility are judged to be truthful, even when they are not (George et al., 2014). A toxic candidate with an impressive resume may, therefore, move through the process even when they are deceptive in their interview responses. If an organization is rushed to make a decision in their selection process or has pressure to promote someone perceived to be a strong performer, red flags in the interview process may be ignored. Some researchers have stated most people are incapable of detecting deception even when trained to do so (Gladwell, 2019). If true, an interview guide may still allow toxic leaders into the ranks of HR departments.

This solution is also limited in its focus on selection of leaders in HR and not addressing toxicity which may already be present. If an organization discovers there is a toxic leader working in their HR department, this solution is not of any assistance. Recommendations from prior research may provide some guidance in those cases, such as providing targeted leadership training (Harris et al., 2007) or removing them from their role (Erickson et al., 2015).

Implementation of the Proposed Solution

The most challenging element of the implementation plan for this tool is its introduction to and adoption by hiring leaders. The use of the questions and answer indicators is relatively straightforward, as structured interview guides have been commonplace in U.S. organizations for a few decades.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution

The proposed interview guide could be introduced to HR leaders through conferences or seminars on hiring in HR. Structured interview guides are not uncommon tools for HR leaders, so implementing the guide in consideration of lower-level HR leadership candidates would not be difficult or unusual. The guide could also be published in online HR professional forums for download and use by HR leaders.

Introducing this interview guide to senior leaders outside the HR function who may hire an HR leader could prove more challenging. There may be opportunities to introduce the concept of toxic leadership in the HR department at conferences or in business-focused publications. The guide could also be introduced to executive search firms who contract with organizations to aid them in searching for HR leaders. Those firms could then introduce the guide to their clients when they are engaging in a search for a new HR leader.

Timeline for Implementation of the Solution

The interview guide could be introduced over several months at conferences or in publications. This solution can be immediately incorporated into the interview processes of any organization seeking to avoid toxic leadership in their HR department.

Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution

Even with the implementation of a selection tool, there is always a risk of missing the clues to toxic leadership in an interview, or of a leader becoming toxic over time. Ultimately, senior leaders should continue to implement additional recommendations for addressing existing toxic leaders, such as 360 assessments for HR leaders (Erickson et al., 2015). Interventions typically implemented by HR leaders, such as effective leadership training (Aryee et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2019), zero-tolerance policies (Liu et al., 2012; Walter et al., 2015), and employee engagement surveys should be applied to the HR department as well, and the results reviewed by a higher-level leader such as the CEO.

The interview guide can be evaluated by checking with the HR team members and peer leaders about the quality of HR leadership in the organization after a leader is hired utilizing the guide. This provides for the checks and balances required to limit toxic leadership in the organization (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

An alternate approach for evaluating this solution could be to formally test the interview questions on existing HR leaders and have subordinates complete a toxic leadership evaluation assessment, such as the one developed by Tepper (2000). The results of the interviews and the subordinate scores could be compared to determine whether more toxic leaders, as evaluated by their direct reports, answer the recommended interview questions with more of the toxic indicators outlined in the guide.

Implications

Practical Implications

Toxic leaders have damaging effects on their followers. Prior research has shown the presence of toxic leaders to increase followers' intent to leave the organization, decrease their job satisfaction, and decrease the team's work performance (e.g. Farh &

Chen, 2014; Harris et al., 2007; Mathieu et al., 2014). By avoiding or eliminating toxic leaders within an organization, these negative outcomes can be diminished. Reducing toxicity in any department can positively impact individual employees' work experience, and the same may be true within the HR department. The likelihood of HR departments to commit to addressing toxic leaders elsewhere in the organization, as recommended in prior studies (e.g. Hight et al., 2019; Nandkeolyar et al., 2014), may be hindered by the presence of toxic leaders within the HR department itself.

There is a broader impact to organizational finances if toxic leaders are allowed to remain in power. In 2018, voluntary turnover cost U.S. organizations \$617 billion, according to a study by Work Institute (Mahan et al., 2019). In addition, 11.3% of voluntary departures in the Work Institute study were caused by manager behavior, which was deemed preventable by the organization (Mahan et al., 2019). Decreased productivity, which is one effect of lower job performance, also has a financial cost to organizations. While HR roles do not directly contribute to revenue in most organizations, the negative effects of toxic leadership in this department can impact the organizations financial performance through increased turnover and decreased productivity. In addition, if there is a broader effect of toxic HR leadership on individuals outside of the HR department, which was mentioned by some study participants, the harm to the organization's financials may be further increased through broader employee turnover or productivity effects.

Finally, there are implications for the effectiveness of the HR function if toxic leadership is allowed to prevail. Several study participants noted their inability to successfully provide service to their organization's leaders and employees. If employees

find the HR team difficult to work with or, as in some cases in this study, insulting or demeaning, they may be less likely to seek HR support for future needs. This can impact not only the performance of that organization's HR department but the broader reputation of the function. If employees avoid their HR department and instead pursue remediation of concerns through attorneys or regulatory bodies, the legal costs to the organization could be substantial.

Implications for Future Research

Additional research on toxic leadership in the HR department is warranted. Some qualitative approaches such as a case study or ethnography may prove challenging, as these types of studies likely require disclosure to a leader that he or she is considered toxic. Additional phenomenological or grounded theory studies in other parts of the U.S. or other countries could further expand on the findings of the current study in alternate organizational and ethnic cultures. The replication of Hight et al.'s (2019) grounded theory study within HR departments might provide insights into HR employees' perceptions regarding the precursors and effects of toxic HR leaders as compared to those same constructs in other departments. Research of this type may further answer the call by Thoroughgood et al. (2019) for additional qualitative research on toxic leadership in various contexts.

Quantitative research on toxic leadership in HR is also merited, including prevalence studies and further exploration of both performance effects and coping techniques. Replication of prior studies such as Nandkeolyar et al. (2014) or Harris et al. (2007) within HR departments could provide further insight into the phenomenon of toxic HR leaders and their effects on followers. Prevalence studies could provide insight into

the pervasiveness of toxicity in HR leadership as compared to other departments. If toxic leadership is found to be more or less prevalent in HR than elsewhere, additional qualitative research may be merited to determine why.

In the coronavirus pandemic occurring at the same time this research was analyzed, popular publications have discussed the increased importance of HR leadership during the crisis (e.g. Caminiti, 2020; Emond & Maese, 2020). One timely research focus may be to study the effectiveness of toxic HR leaders during the global pandemic, either from the perspective of their HR team members, their organization's leaders, or both. The impact of toxicity during a crisis has been studied in contexts where the toxic leadership contributed to the crisis, such as in the U.S. financial crisis of 2008 (McDonald & Robinson, 2009). Little research exists on the effects of toxic leadership on response and recovery efforts in other types of crises, such as the one currently faced by organizations globally.

Some effort should be made to understand the impact of toxic HR leaders on the entire organization. For example, research on whether toxicity is effectively addressed in other departments when an organization has toxic HR leaders could increase our understanding of the effect of toxic HR leaders. Similarly, comparative research on the effectiveness of people practices in organizations with or without toxic HR leaders can increase understanding of whether toxic leadership within this department impacts only HR department employees or has more far-reaching effects.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

Leadership is defined as an interactive process in which one party influences another to act in support of a defined goal (Haslam et al., 2011). While most would agree

toxic leadership is not desirable, given its negative effects, it still fundamentally fits within this definition of leadership. Even in considering authentic leadership as a style which “incorporates the leader’s self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept” (Northouse, 2016, p. 196), leaders can be authentically toxic. The goal for organizations and leaders themselves should be effective leadership, which would eliminate toxic leadership from the practical leadership style options.

Through a review of prior literature and the current study of the lived experience of HR professionals working under a toxic HR leader, one form of ineffective leadership can be better understood and avoided. There may be far-reaching impacts to improving the effectiveness of leadership within the HR department, given HR’s role in training and developing other organizational leaders. Thus, by eliminating toxicity in HR, the ripple effect on leadership could be significant.

Summary of the Dissertation in Practice

This dissertation in practice was a qualitative phenomenological study on the lived experience of HR professionals working under a toxic HR leader. Twelve HR professionals in southeast Texas volunteered to participate after reviewing a call for participants sent through local HR professional organizations. Semi-structured interviews focused on the description of the toxic leader’s behaviors, the coping techniques used by the participant, and the effects the experience had on the participant’s work performance. Coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews resulted in the identification of seven themes: (1) the toxic HR leader was manipulative, controlling, and demeaning, (2) the toxic HR leader was incompetent and self-serving, and therefore did not match participants’ expectations of an HR leader, (3) the toxic HR leader also displayed some

positive traits, including intelligence and kindness, (4) various coping techniques were utilized by HR professionals when working for a toxic HR leader, including trying to explain the leader's behavior, (5) working for a toxic HR leader impacted followers' work performance, lowered their confidence, and took an emotional and physical toll, (6) the experience of working for the toxic HR leader had negative consequences after the experience ended, but participants ultimately felt they were in a better place, and (7) others in the organization were complicit in the leader's toxic behaviors or their retention of a leadership role; senior leaders were often blind to the toxic behavior.

An interview guide has been developed as a proposed solution to address toxic leadership in HR. The guide utilizes both the themes from this research study and additional research on deception in interviews. The guide includes both interview process recommendations and sample questions based on the current study's findings. Hiring leaders could quickly incorporate the interview guide into their selection processes for HR leadership roles once the guide has been introduced.

Given the harm toxic leaders can inflict on followers and organizations, avoiding the hire or promotion of a toxic leader is ideal. When toxic leadership is already present in an organization, the HR department must often get involved in identifying and addressing the toxicity. As such, the existence of toxic leadership within this department can be problematic as those employees are the victims of toxic leadership and may be limited in their ability to address the issue.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol: Toxic Leadership in Human Resources (HR)

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research project on toxic leadership in HR. I will start with some short demographic questions, then move into more substantive ones. Your comments will remain confidential and anonymous.

It can be difficult for some people to recount situations related to working under a toxic leader. Please let me know if you need to take a break or if you have any questions now or as we go through the interview.

Demographic Questions:

What is your current title?

In what industry do you work?

How many years have you been in your current role?

How many total years have you worked in HR?

What level of education have you attained?

Questions:

1. Tell me about the toxic leader. When did you work for him/her and for how long?
2. Why do you believe this leader was toxic?
3. Tell me at least one story about an experience you had working for this toxic leader in HR. (Possible probing questions: Can you think of an additional story?)

Tell me more about that situation. How did you feel when that occurred?)

4. What exposure do you believe this leader had to education on effective leadership? (Possible probing questions: Why do you believe the leader had that exposure? Was he or she involved in training related to effective leadership?)
5. Were there any consequences for you during the time you worked for this leader? Describe any consequences you experienced during that time and whether you believe your performance was impacted.
6. Do you believe you were the only team member that experienced those consequences? Why or why not?
7. How did you cope during the time you worked for this leader? (Possible probing questions: Do you believe that method of coping was helpful? Why or why not? Did you try other coping mechanisms?)
8. If you no longer work for the leader, have you needed to utilize any coping techniques in subsequent roles?
9. If there is anything more you would like to add about your experience working for a toxic HR leader that I have not asked please describe that for me.
10. Do you know of another HR professional who has worked for a toxic HR leader and who may be interested in participating in this study?

Additional questions for depth and breadth to the above questions:

Would you expound on that?

Tell me more.

How would you describe that in a different way?

I would like to hear more about that.

Would you clarify that for me?

Take me through your thought processes during that time.

What were the consequences?

What was the effect of that incident?

What was your reaction to that behavior?

Techniques to address any distress or emotion by the participant:

Utilize empathetic language such as, "I understand this may be difficult to talk about."

Ask if they would like to skip that question or come back to it later.

Offer to allow them to take a break.

Appendix B

Request for Participation to HR Houston

To: Barbara Lane, Executive Director of HR Houston

From: Kim Garcia, EdD Student, Creighton University and Member, HR Houston

My name is Kim Garcia. I am currently a student at Creighton University and am in the midst of preparing my dissertation for an EdD in Interdisciplinary Leadership. This email comes as a request for assistance.

My dissertation topic is related to the effects of Toxic Leadership within the Human Resources (HR) department. As part of this study, I would like to find 10-15 HR professionals who may be willing to participate in a qualitative interview on toxic leadership. The individuals would be undisclosed, all would sign a confidentiality agreement, and they would each be assigned an alias within the study findings.

My intent is to discover more about the experience of HR professionals who work or have worked under a toxic HR leader. This is a phenomenological dissertation regarding this lived experience. I am aware that HR professionals may be called upon to address toxic leadership elsewhere in the organization. This work may be related to the drafting and implementation of policies or the utilization of engagement surveys to uncover toxicity. I am curious about the impact of toxic leadership when it occurs within the HR department itself.

Attached is a copy of the participation request I hope you can share with your membership. If you would like to discuss the study further, I can be reached via cell phone at 281-795-0296 would greatly appreciate any assistance you can offer. Thank you in advance for your help.

Regards,

Kim Garcia

Edd Student, Creighton University

Appendix C

Call for Participants

Doctoral Student Looking for Assistance and Volunteers for Research on Toxic Leadership

This research will complete an investigation of toxic leadership within human resources (HR) departments. There is a premise that toxic leaders negatively impact their followers and the organizations for which they work. HR professionals are often called upon to identify or address toxic leaders elsewhere in the organization, but studies on the presence of toxic leadership within the HR department are extremely limited.

I am investigating this phenomenon as a human experience that affects any race, culture, industry, or organization. I am looking for 15 HR professionals to volunteer for individual interviews to discuss their experience working for a toxic HR leader within the past five to ten years. The questions are aimed at understanding the toxic leader's behavior, any perceived impact from working for that individual, and any coping mechanisms used. The intention is to help organizations identify and avoid toxicity within the HR department.

For the purposes of this study, toxic leadership is defined as follows:

Toxic leadership is a pervasive, enduring pattern of leader behaviors that are harmful to the follower and/or the organization. Some examples of toxic leadership include belittling remarks, public humiliation, pitting employees against one another, taking credit for others' work, bullying, manipulating others, and leaving subordinates worse off than they were before.

If you are interested in volunteering for this research please contact Kim Garcia at kimberleygarcia@creighton.edu. Your name will not be used in the data collection or reporting. An information form will be provided to all participants and your comments will remain confidential. The intention is to complete the interviews during the spring of 2020. Thank you in advance for your interest in becoming a voice for HR.

All participants must be fluent in English and have the ability to join an online meeting lasting approximately 45 minutes. A computer with a camera and microphone will be required for participation.

Appendix D

Participant Information Form

You are invited to take part in a research study of human resources (HR) professionals' perspective on working under a toxic HR leader. You must have had prior experience in reporting to a toxic HR leader in order to take part in this study. The researcher is inviting 15 HR professionals who have had prior experience working under a toxic HR leader to be in the study. This form is part of a process to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Kim Garcia, who is a doctoral student at Creighton University. The participants are not being recruited within the researcher's workplace.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand the definition of toxic behaviors, perceived impact on performance, and coping mechanisms used by HR professionals when reporting under a toxic HR leader.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Agree to participate in a 45-minute one-on-one interview, as this is a one-time collection of data.
- Agree to be audio recorded during the 45-minute period.

Here are some sample questions:

- 1) Why do you believe this leader was toxic?
- 2) Were there any consequences for you, positive or negative, as a result of working

for this toxic leader?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision regarding whether or not you choose to participate in the study. No one at your professional HR organization will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop your participation in the study at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The benefit to this study is the sharing of experiences that may help address toxic leadership in another HR department. The results of this study may provide input that helps organizations better screen out toxic leaders from HR roles.

Payment:

This is a voluntary interview, and no payment for services will be rendered.

Privacy:

The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by not using actual names or company names, so aliases will be provided for any such information that is shared. All data collected in this study will be kept in a password-protected file on a personal computer. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the

university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at kimberleygarcia@creighton.edu. You may also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Lorraine Cleeton at lorrainecleeton@creighton.edu.

For other questions, you may contact Creighton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) at irb@creighton.edu. Creighton University's approval number for this study is IRB #2000642. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Appendix E

Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research participant.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
 - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
 - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

Appendix F



Office of the Provost
Research Compliance

DATE:	22-Jan-2020
TO:	Garcia, Kimberley
FROM:	Social / Behavioral IRB Board
PROJECT TITLE:	THE IMPACT OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN HUMAN RESOURCES
REFERENCE #:	2000642
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Initial Application
REVIEW TYPE	Exempt
ACTION:	APPROVED
EFFECTIVE DATE:	22-Jan-2020

Thank you for your Initial Application submission materials for this project. The following items were reviewed with this submission:

- Creighton University HS eForm~

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or irb@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and number in all correspondence with this committee.

Institutional Review Board

† 402.280.2126 | † 402.280.3200
Dr. C. C. and Mabel L. Criss Health Sciences Complex I
2500 California Plaza Omaha, NE 68178

creighton.edu
creighton.edu/researchservices/rcocommittees/irb

Appendix G

Table 2

Themes, Codes, and Representative Quotes

Theme	Included codes (Number of times mentioned)	Representative Quotes
1. The toxic HR leader was demeaning, manipulative, and controlling.	Demeaned/belittled others (30)	“she would completely ignore her entire team”
	Displayed favoritism (17)	“if we were getting along, it really made her mad”
	Controlling (15)	“she told me, ‘I will never forgive you and I will never forget what you did.’”
	Kept secrets (10)	“I watched her take other people apart”
	Lied (10) Didn’t like others going to subordinate (10)	“easily telling you that’s a stupid thing to think or a stupid way to think”
	Pitted employees against each other (9)	
	Isolated/ignored subordinates (6)	
2. The toxic HR leader was incompetent and self-serving, and therefore did not match participants’ expectations of an HR leader.	Didn’t match my expectation of an HR leader (15)	“it was alarming the level of incompetence she had”
	Self-serving (12)	“she was not competent in HR”
	Failed to handle HR issues (8)	“she is a prime picture of what not-HR-friendly is supposed to look like”
	Incompetence (7)	
3. The toxic HR leader also displayed some positive behaviors.	Threatened by others’ competence (7)	
	Mix of positive and negative attributes (10)	“sometimes she was very polite and friendly and approachable” “she was incredibly bright” “the individual was good, very knowledgeable”

4. Various coping techniques were utilized by HR professionals when working for a toxic HR leader, including trying to explain the leader's behavior.	Passive coping: Focused on work (12) Passive coping: Accept situation (5) Active coping: Attempted to understand leader (18) Active coping: Social support (11) Active coping: Resigned/moved out of department (10)	"I really just tried to stay focused on my responsibilities and my tasks" "I would, you know, talk to my sister and talk to my best friend" "I left and I did not have anything lined up. So, that's how bad it got, to the point of either you leave this organization or you're going to be a basketcase" "a lot of her personal character flaws were just trying to mask and cover the fact that she maybe wasn't qualified for the role"
5. Working for a toxic HR leader impacted followers' work performance, lowered their confidence, and took an emotional and physical toll.	Impact to followers' work performance (29) Impact to followers' confidence (12) Stressful (10) Medical/physical impacts (5) Emotionally draining (4) Depressed (4)	"she prevented us from getting on-the-ground work for the employees done" "it really made me second-guess my expertise and my knowledge and kind of doubt myself" "I think there was a little bit of depression" "that was the first experience I'd had with, like, racing heartbeat and shortness of breath and all these anxiety symptoms"
6. The experience of working for the toxic HR leader had negative consequences after the experience ended, but participants ultimately felt they were in a better place.	Trust/confidence issues in next role (8) Limited my career growth (7) Better situation after (13) Self-discovery (6)	"I had trust issues for a while" "I felt like I still had to kind of walk on eggshells a bit" "I think in a really weird, weird way, I grew from that positively" "she taught me a lot about myself and a lot about bad leadership"

<p>7. Others in the organization were complicit in the leader's toxic behaviors or their retention of a leadership role. Senior leaders were often blind to the toxic behavior.</p>	<p>Toxic behavior was known (4) Had support from others (3) Good at managing up (3)</p>	<p>“she could do anything she wanted. Her and the CEO were just tight” “the only other person I could have gone to would have been the president of the company and he was her biggest supporter” “the reason why they're allowed to continue as long as they are in role is because they have a very good grasp of managing up”</p>
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Appendix H

Interview Question Guide for HR Leadership



Interview Guide

HR Leadership Avoiding Toxicity

Why does this matter?

- Toxic leaders may operate within HR departments
- Research studies suggest toxic leaders are manipulative, controlling, demeaning, self-serving, and incompetent
- Direct reports of toxic HR leaders describe having lower work performance and decreased confidence in their roles
- Eliminating toxic HR leaders in the interview process may be one way to avoid these negative consequences

Interview Process

- Interview in groups, preferably with intact teams or individuals who work with each other regularly
- Schedule at least one hour for each interview panel
- If hiring a head of HR for your organization, consider asking a trusted senior HR leader from another organization to participate in the interviews
- Assign specific questions to specific interviewers
 - o Utilize planned probing questions to confirm answers
 - o Additional probing questions include: Tell me more about that. How did/would that work? What was your team's reaction?
- Assign one interviewer to monitor body language/reactions to questions asked
- Verify prior HR experience prior to the interview
- Ensure background and reference checks are completed and reviewed before an offer is made

The questions on subsequent pages should be utilized in addition to general interview questions about the candidate's experience, expertise, knowledge of the company, and interest in the role.

Study Theme for Toxic HR Leaders	Sample Past-Behavioral Question	Sample Situational Question	Positive (non-toxic) Answer Indicators	Negative (toxic) Answer Indicators
Theme 1: The toxic HR leader was manipulative, controlling, and demeaning.	<i>We have all been in a meeting and thought someone else's comment was illogical or nonsensical. Tell us about a time that happened to you and how you handled the situation.</i>	<i>What would you do if a team member embarrassed you in front of your boss?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address concerns in private • Utilize tact when addressing concerns publicly • Weigh the relationship impact of addressing concerns with the need to correct inaccuracies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address issues publicly using demeaning or embarrassing language • Yelling, berating • Inability to forgive mistakes
	<i>How have you built teamwork in the past?</i>	<i>How would you build relationships with your existing team here?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek ways to proactively build or maintain relationships between team members • Desire for team members to get along 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team relationships are unimportant, focus only on getting work done • Dislike or distrust of team members being 'too close'
	<i>In the past, how have you stayed informed on the work your team is doing?</i>	<i>What would you do if a team member gave different advice to a leader than the advice you would have given?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions of the team • Talk to team members privately when we disagree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team members must copy me on all emails • If a team member gives 'wrong' advice, I correct it with the leader right away
Theme 2: The toxic HR leader was incompetent and self-serving, and therefore did not match participants' expectations of an HR leader.	<i>Give us an example of how you have supported the needs of others over your own needs.</i>	<i>How would you demonstrate service to our employees in your first six months in the role?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes others for their contributions • Expresses value in all employees and leaders • Seeks input from various parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks attention for self • Looks down on individuals in certain roles • Wants to work independently
	<i>Tell me about the most difficult HR situation you have had to handle.</i> <i>Probing: What made it difficult for you? How did you handle it? What was the impact on others?</i>	<i>Suppose an employee has reported they were sexually harassed by a high-ranking, successful leader. What would you do?</i> <i>Probing: Would there be an investigation? How would the complainant be treated?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full investigation of serious complaints • All parties are treated respectfully • Leaders are not 'let off the hook' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignoring a situation • Dismissing a complainant without investigation • Disregard for employees' safety or well-being
Theme 3: The toxic HR leader also displayed some positive behaviors.	General questions about strengths and weaknesses may be helpful here. Key is not to ignore red flags in other answers, as toxic leaders are often charming and intelligent.			
Theme 4: Various coping techniques were utilized by HR professionals when working for a toxic HR leader, including trying to explain the leader's behavior.	<i>Tell us about the turnover in prior teams you have led.</i> <i>Probing: Why did people leave?</i>	<i>How would you approach team members who you felt were avoiding you?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks to understand reasons for departures or avoidance • Incorporates feedback on own leadership style • Supports team members' career growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defensive, angry, or dismissive about turnover or avoidance • High turnover in prior roles • Inability to recall prior team turnover
Theme 5: Working for a toxic HR leader impacted followers' work performance, lowered their confidence, and took an emotional and physical toll.	<i>How have you built confidence in team members in the past?</i>	<i>How do you show support for team members?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gets to know team members and their motivations • Describes supporting difficult team members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot describe supportive behaviors • Focuses only on support of one or two top performers
	<i>Tell us about a time you were concerned about a team member's well-being and how you addressed the matter.</i>	<i>How would you know if a subordinate was depressed or feeling dejected?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asks questions with genuine concern • Is intuitive about team members' feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is unconcerned with or unaware of feelings • Directs employees to ignore their feelings and get back to work
Theme 6: The experience of working for the toxic HR leader had negative consequences after the experience ended, but participants ultimately felt they were in a better place.	<i>Do you stay in touch with any team members from prior roles? What do they say about the time working for you?</i>	<i>How do you think former direct reports are doing as a result of your leadership?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has positive contact with prior employees • Can articulate specific positive feedback from prior employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No/limited contact with prior employees • Is unaware what prior employees would say about him/her • Does not appear to care how prior employees are doing
Theme 7: Others in the organization were complicit in the leader's toxic behaviors or their retention of a leadership role. Senior leaders were often blind to the toxic behavior.	<i>Tell us about a time you received critical feedback from a peer or leader which was difficult to hear.</i>	<i>How could I support you as your leader/peer?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks feedback from others • Incorporates critical feedback into leadership behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has never received critical feedback • States prior leaders have left him/her alone or expects to be left alone • Strong signs of anger or defensiveness about critical feedback