



How Toxic Bosses and Poor Leadership Contribute to Employee Depression and Anxiety

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Abstract: The article examines the detrimental impact of toxic management and poor leadership on employee well-being and organizational performance. Unlike demanding but fair managers, toxic leaders actively undermine employee morale and workplace effectiveness. Through authoritarian and destructive behaviors such leaders negatively affect employees' mental health, causing increased anxiety and depression.

In contrast, toxic leaders create a detrimental environment by actively undermining workplace conditions and employee well-being. Poor leadership, characterized more subtly by passivity, indecisiveness, and inadequate feedback, further exacerbates these problems. Passive leaders frequently avoid conflict resolution and decision-making, resulting in confusion and instability within the workplace. The absence of constructive feedback additionally impedes employees' ability to develop skills and achieve professional growth.

The article proposes solutions for mitigating these negative impacts. Organizations can benefit from adopting practices such as early identification of problematic leadership behaviors through constructive feedback mechanisms, including regular and structured feedback sessions and evaluations. Leadership behavior assessment tools and timely interventions, such as 360-degree feedback, can help identify and address problematic managerial behaviors before they become deeply embedded in organizational culture. Additionally, fostering an open and supportive culture is essential, enabling employees to safely express their concerns, thus promoting workplace well-being.

The article emphasizes the importance of proactive organizational measures to recognize and reduce toxic

leadership behaviors, thereby safeguarding employee mental health and enhancing overall organizational effectiveness.

This study will benefit managers, HR professionals, researchers, business owners, and anyone involved in organizational management and employee welfare.

Keywords: toxic leaders, poor leadership, mental health, depression and anxiety, stress management.

Introduction: In the contemporary world, work plays a pivotal role in an individual's life, influencing not only financial stability but also emotional well-being. A workplace dominated by a manager who undermines initiative, consistently criticizes, and manipulates employees is not merely hypothetical—it is a daily reality for many. Issues such as toxic management and poor leadership are increasingly coming under scrutiny, as their negative impact on employees' mental health becomes both evident and concerning.

Toxic managers are not simply strict or demanding supervisors. Instead, they are leaders who exhibit harmful behaviors such as hostility, incompetence, manipulation, or indifference, actively damaging employee well-being by creating hostile or unsupportive environments. Poor leadership can similarly manifest through incompetence, indifference, or an inability to motivate and guide teams effectively. In either scenario, employees find themselves in situations that significantly threaten their psychological well-being. Persistent stress, lack of recognition, and the absence of a supportive environment gradually erode employees' confidence and morale.

Furthermore, toxic management creates a detrimental workplace atmosphere, negatively affecting multiple organizational levels—from reduced employee engagement to the breakdown of team cohesion. This underscores the importance and timeliness of addressing employee mental health, as it is not only an individual concern but a critical factor influencing the overall success and sustainability of organizations.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the connection between toxic leadership and mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, highlighting the urgency for organizations to address this issue proactively.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

To examine the influence of toxic management and poor leadership on employees' mental health, a literature review was conducted. This review included

academic articles [1, 4, 9, 10, 12], professional organizational reports [2], and publications from reputable online sources (Gympass, Sciencespo, Health Assured, Forbes). The method employed was a narrative synthesis, which involved extracting key findings, statistical data, and insights organized according to main themes: characteristics of toxic and poor leadership, their impact on employees, and possible solutions. Although the subjective nature of source selection presents a limitation, objectivity was enhanced by incorporating a diverse range of materials. Ethical considerations were not addressed within the scope of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Toxic leadership and poor management are phenomena that have increasingly gained attention in recent years due to their destructive impact on both employees and organizations [1]. Toxic leaders are managers whose behaviors negatively affect subordinates by creating an atmosphere of stress, fear, and discomfort. Poor leadership, meanwhile, encompasses a broader range of issues—from explicit toxicity to general managerial ineffectiveness, including incompetence, passivity, and lack of strategic vision.

The issue of toxic leadership is not simply a fashionable term; rather, it poses a genuine threat to employees' mental health. According to Gallup research [2], managers account for 70% of the variation in team engagement levels. Moreover, survey data [3] indicates that 47% of employees identify work-related stress as a primary factor negatively affecting their mental health, making it a leading cause of emotional health problems. Stress caused by management leads to decreased productivity, increased employee turnover, and even physical illnesses such as hypertension or insomnia. Employees suffering from depression miss an average of 27 more workdays per year due to physical and psychological symptoms compared to those without depression [7].

The survey data diagram presented in Figure 1 [7] illustrates the relative prevalence of various mental stress factors among employees, with work-related stress ranking highest (47%), followed by insufficient sleep quality (44%) and inflation (42%). The next level of stress factors includes lack of physical exercise (30%), poor nutrition (22%), and health issues (19%), reflecting a combination of lifestyle and medical concerns. Social and informational stress factors, such as isolation (16%) and information overload (14%), occupy the middle range, whereas anxiety related to artificial intelligence (9%) and discrimination (7%) appear less frequent but

still notable.

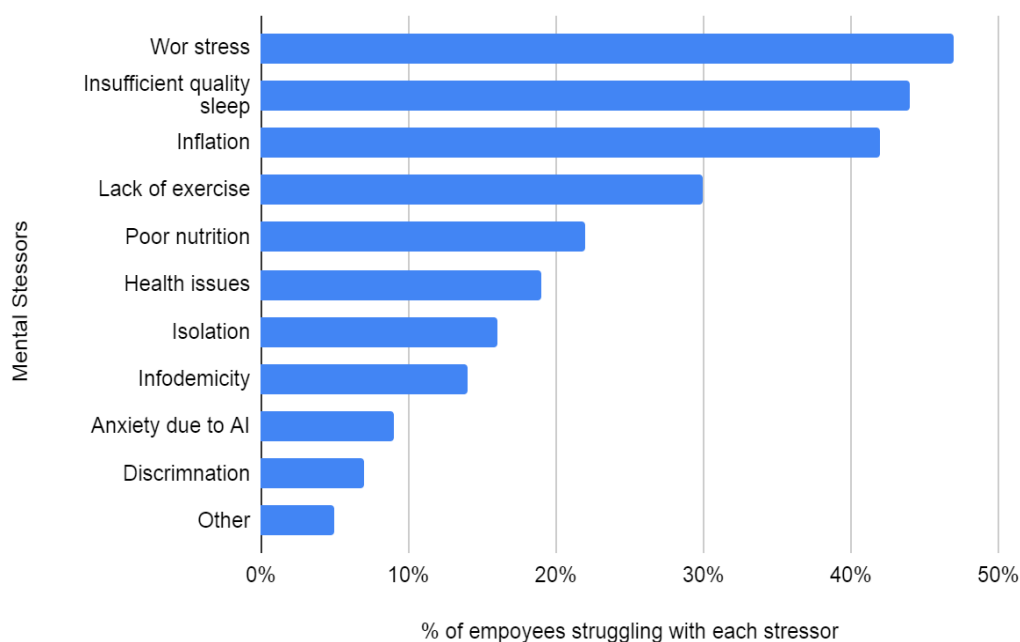


Fig. 1 Results of respondents' answers about the causes of stress at work [7]

Toxic managers are not merely strict or demanding supervisors; their behavior goes beyond ordinary management and profoundly harms their teams. Such managers create environments in which employees feel oppressed, humiliated, and demotivated. To understand what makes them toxic, it is crucial to examine their primary characteristics and how these traits manifest in real-life situations.

Authoritarianism is one key trait of toxic bosses. These leaders demand complete obedience, do not tolerate objections, and suppress all initiatives. They believe their approach is the only correct one and are unwilling to consider alternative views. For instance, a manager who forces employees to repeatedly redo projects according to their own preferences, ignoring employees' suggestions even if these could save time or improve outcomes, illustrates authoritarian behavior. In such environments, employees quickly lose the motivation to demonstrate creativity, as their ideas will likely be rejected.

Lack of empathy is another characteristic trait. Toxic leaders disregard employees' personal circumstances and emotional states, showing indifference to their personal situations unless directly related to work. A typical example is a manager who demands employees to work during their days off, despite serious family issues, threatening dismissal if they refuse. This demonstrates complete disregard for human emotions

and needs, leaving subordinates feeling helpless and isolated.

Manipulativeness is another sign of toxic leadership. These managers exploit employees to achieve personal objectives, often using deception or coercion. They may promise attractive rewards to motivate employees and then fail to fulfill these promises. For example, a manager might promise a promotion in exchange for overtime work, encouraging an employee to put in extra effort, only to later ignore or deny the promise under various pretexts. Such behavior undermines trust and leaves employees feeling exploited.

Excessive criticism and humiliation are common behaviors of toxic bosses. They publicly ridicule employees' mistakes or constantly highlight their shortcomings without offering constructive solutions. Instead of helping employees grow, such managers demotivate and damage self-confidence. For instance, a supervisor who calls an employee "useless" at a team meeting due to a minor mistake, rather than privately addressing the error and suggesting solutions, creates not only humiliation but also a pervasive atmosphere of fear within the team.

Narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism represent deeper psychological traits frequently observed among toxic bosses. Studies conducted in 2022 by psychologist Robert Hare [4] indicated that certain managers exhibit psychopathic traits, such as a

lack of conscience and a tendency toward manipulation. Narcissistic leaders are excessively self-centered, believing they are the focal point of every situation, while Machiavellian leaders treat people as instruments to achieve personal ambitions. For example, a manager who takes credit for the team's successful project yet quickly blames subordinates for any failure displays a narcissistic or Machiavellian trait. Such behavior illustrates egocentrism and willingness to sacrifice others for personal gain.

These traits make toxic bosses not merely unpleasant but genuinely destructive to both the team and the organization. Their actions suppress employee initiative, erode trust, lower self-esteem, and foster an atmosphere of fear and instability. Identifying such managers is the first step toward protecting individuals and teams from their harmful influence.

Poor leadership is a phenomenon not always associated with explicit toxicity but capable of exerting an equally negative influence on employees and the entire team. It manifests through incompetence, passivity, lack of vision, and inadequate feedback, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, stress, and demotivation.

Poor leadership often begins with incompetence. A manager lacking the necessary skills to lead a team or accomplish tasks becomes a source of chaos. For example, a supervisor who cannot clearly articulate project goals due to a lack of understanding leaves employees working blindly, resulting in errors, decreased efficiency, and growing frustration. A study conducted in France demonstrated that every euro invested in management training yields four euros in profit [5].

Another key aspect of poor leadership is passivity. Passive leaders avoid making decisions, leaving employees in uncertainty. They may ignore issues, hoping they resolve themselves, or shift responsibility onto others. For instance, a manager who does not intervene in conflicts among employees allows situations to escalate, leading to increased tension and a sense of abandonment within the team.

Lack of vision is another trait of ineffective leadership. Such a leader is unable to inspire the team or provide clear direction. They might be uncertain about strategy or simply unable to communicate their ideas effectively. For example, a leader who changes priorities daily—assigning the team one project today, another tomorrow, and returning to the original one afterward—causes confusion, disorientation, and a decline in employee motivation. Forty-one percent of respondents in one survey [6] indicated that their

leadership does not value innovation, and 67% reported that leadership operates based on the mentality of "this is how we've always done it."

Insufficient feedback also plays a crucial role in poor leadership. Employees receive neither praise for good performance nor constructive criticism for mistakes, depriving them of opportunities for growth and development. An illustrative example is a manager who remains silent about an employee's performance for months, only to suddenly terminate them for poor productivity. Such behavior destroys trust and demotivates the team.

The difference between poor and toxic leadership lies in the latter often being openly aggressive, manipulative, or humiliating toward subordinates to suppress their will or self-esteem. Poor leaders, in contrast, may simply be inept, passive, or unable to manage effectively. They do not necessarily intend to harm employees—their issue lies in inaction or incompetence. Nevertheless, the consequences for the team are similar: both types of leaders create environments where employees struggle.

Several strategies can be implemented by organizations to address toxic leadership and support employees' mental health, thereby fostering healthier workplace environments. These approaches help build leadership capabilities, regulate managerial behavior, and cultivate trust within teams.

Companies can implement leadership training programs focusing on emotional intelligence and managerial competencies. Emotional intelligence helps managers improve their ability to manage emotions and interactions effectively. Monitoring managerial behavior through regular anonymous employee surveys, such as 360-degree feedback assessments, is another effective method. Such assessments collect opinions from subordinates, colleagues, and senior management, helping organizations identify toxic managers and address problematic behavior promptly. For instance, since emotional intelligence enables managers to better understand and respond to employees' emotional needs, leadership training programs can greatly enhance the overall workplace atmosphere.

Companies can also cultivate a culture of openness, psychological safety, and transparent communication by providing employees with secure channels for feedback. For example, Salesforce maintains a hotline where employees can anonymously report toxic behavior [11].

Employees experiencing toxic management or poor leadership can adopt several practical strategies to

mitigate the negative effects and protect their mental health. Techniques such as mindfulness meditation and breathing exercises can help manage anxiety and stress. For example, an employee feeling overwhelmed by continuous criticism from a supervisor might take a brief 5–10-minute break to focus on breathing and

regain composure. According to survey data [7], regular meditation significantly impacts mental well-being, with 85% of respondents who meditate at least once a month reporting positive mental health, compared to 85% among those who meditate less frequently. These survey results are illustrated in Figure 2.

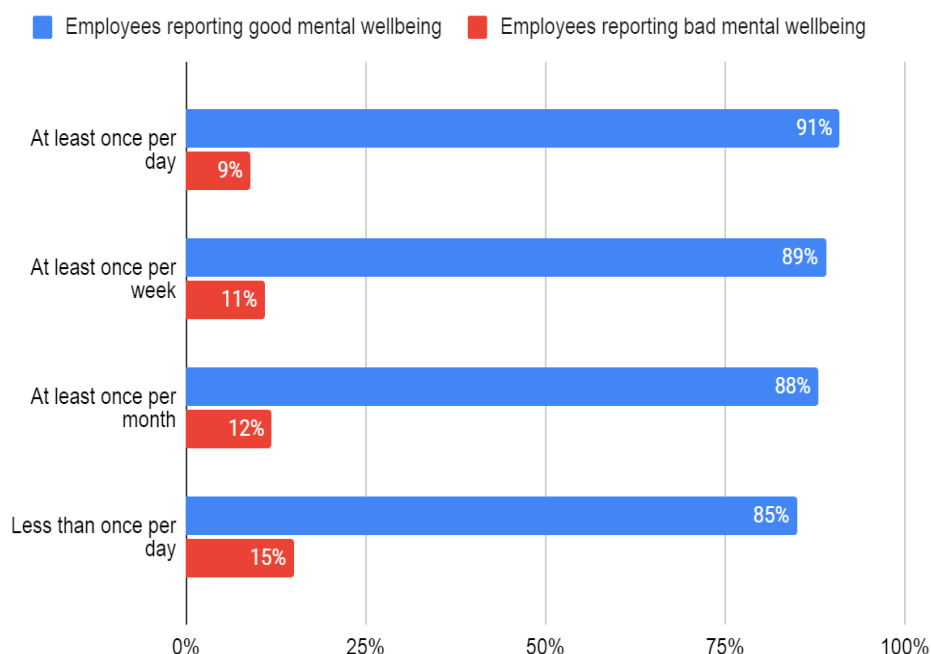
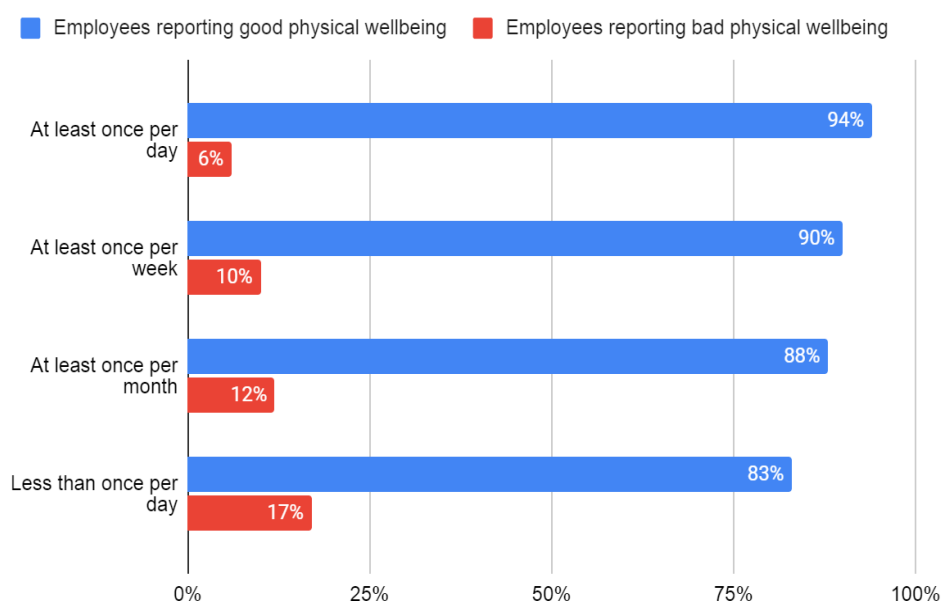


Fig. 2 Results of respondents' answers about the influence of meditation on mental wellbeing [7]

Meditation and mindfulness also positively influence physical health, as demonstrated by survey findings. Among respondents who meditate at least once a day, 94% report good physical health, while only 83% of

those meditating less than once per month report the same level of physical well-being. These findings are presented in Figure 3.



Additionally, the ability to politely but firmly set boundaries is essential for protecting employees' time and energy. For example, if a manager requests the completion of an urgent task late in the evening, the employee might respond: "I can discuss this tomorrow morning, but right now I need to finish my current task." This approach helps prevent unnecessary stress and maintains a healthy balance between work and personal life. Setting clear boundaries not only reduces the risk of burnout but also contributes to a healthier workplace atmosphere.

Seeking support is another critical strategy for managing workplace pressure. Employees may discuss issues with colleagues, reach out to human resources departments, or utilize external psychological services. For instance, in the United States, most large companies offer free counseling through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), allowing staff to anonymously discuss issues and receive professional support. These services typically include mental health assessments, short-term counseling, a 24-hour hotline, and other vital resources for maintaining employee well-being, benefiting both employees and the organization. Employees who receive therapy have a 44% higher likelihood of returning to work, which reduces absenteeism by 45% and improves overall team confidence [8]. Moreover, support from colleagues plays a significant role. Having the opportunity to share concerns with understanding peers significantly reduces the risk of burnout.

These measures provide employees with practical tools to protect themselves from the negative impact of toxic leadership. They require no complex resources yet noticeably improve mental health and help maintain productivity. Real-life examples and research data demonstrate the effectiveness of these measures, enabling individuals not only to cope under challenging conditions but also to feel more confident and calmer at work.

CONCLUSION

Toxic management and poor leadership practices are increasingly recognized as significant factors contributing to employee depression and anxiety. Toxic managers foster an atmosphere of fear and stress, undermining employee morale, while poor leadership exacerbates uncertainty and the absence of clear direction. These negative influences hinder personal and professional growth and harm organizational productivity and employee well-being. Recognizing these issues is essential for creating a healthier workplace culture and improving overall performance.

Organizations must implement proactive measures, such as leadership training, employee feedback mechanisms, and open communication channels, to mitigate the effects of toxic leadership. By prioritizing emotional intelligence, providing consistent feedback, and ensuring employee support, companies can develop a more resilient and motivated workforce. Such efforts not only reduce mental health risks among employees but also enhance the organization's long-term success by fostering a more engaged and cohesive team.

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