

How to Cope from a Toxic Leadership: The Case of Public Organizations

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Abstract

The career ladder system in Public Organizations tends to be hierarchical or top-down, where the existence of leadership is determined by higher leadership. This pattern is similar to most other organizations, where managerial determination is carried out by the top leader or a system where the policy rests with the top leader, causing staff elements not to take part in determining the leader. With this concept, at the managerial level, especially low and middle managers, tend to be more focused on working in accordance with the leaders above them, and pay less attention to the condition of their subordinates, because the one who determines their career pattern is the higher superior. Such levels of hierarchy are felt, especially in government organizations, resulting in staff elements only being able to accept whatever conditions their leaders have, and their only choice is to stay at work or leave. In Public Organizations in Indonesia, the possibility of employees resigning is very small, this is because employee retention in the government sector is good, and there is even a tendency to become a favorite job because the stability of civil servant is maintained. In the Regional Apparatus X, the research location, employee performance assessments are carried out every month through Employee Performance Targets and assessed by the direct superior, so in any case every employee must continue to perform, adapt and be loyal to any type of leader. To reduce bias, this research was conducted by first identifying whether the respondent had a toxic leader, because the perception of the same leader may be different for several staff members. Therefore, using the snowball sampling method, researchers determined respondents and got 15 respondents from Regional Apparatus Organization. The condition of a toxic leader is a crisis condition that may affects employee resilience in performing. Employee behavior in an effort to survive with a toxic leader and continue to perform needs to be understood as a crisis incident phenomenon in the organization. This research contribute to the development of SDGs 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, specifically on Quality of Work.

Keywords: Toxic Leader, Organizational Crisis, Coping Strategy, Public Organizations, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Quality of Work.

1. Introduction

The role of leaders in organizations has been widely studied in previous research, especially related to leadership styles that influence organizations. Many studies in the field of management have recognized many types of leadership, for example transformational, democratic, autocratic, transactional and toxic leadership (Brandebø, 2020), but not much research has been done on toxic leaders. As much research has been done regarding the influence of positive leadership on organizational improvement, or increasing organizational performance, the influence of destructive leaders should also have a negative influence on the

organization. With limited research on toxic leaders, it is largely unknown how negative leadership behavior (harmful leader behavior) is crucial in crises that occur in organizations and requires a strong response from employees. Several recent studies on toxic leader style have identified it as a threatening and detrimental factor in developing employee behavior (Robson & Farquhar, 2021)

In various types of organizations, leaders with destructive behavior will worsen organizational performance and have a negative impact on employee mental health (Erickson et al., 2015; Nyberg et al., 2011; Shaw et al., 2014; Woestman and Wasonga, 2015). Destructive leadership is not the only term used to describe leaders with deviant behavior. There are several terms that can be used to describe the destructive behavior of a leader such as abusive supervisory behavior (Tepper, 2000), Harmful leader behavior (Almeida et al., 2021), Toxic Leadership (Pelletier, 2010), Supervisory incivility (Johnson and Indvik, 2001), and the dark side of leadership (Mathieu et al., 2014). In contrast to other forms of destructive leadership, toxic leaders appear to be more inclusive in terms of types of behavior and their destructive effects (Syahrudin et al., 2021). Mehta and Maheswari (2013) found that the construct includes violence, promotion unfairness, and lack of integrity. Toxic leaders can cause destructive effects on employee mental health and performance and weaken organizational performance. Toxic leader behavior can appear from the highest level to the lowest level of leadership. All types of destructive leadership can cause harm to employees, and the emergence of toxic leadership not only damages work relationships between superiors and subordinates, but also damages the entire leadership mechanism (Baskan, 2020).

With the various negative conditions that may be caused by toxic leaders, this research focuses on employees' efforts to survive and create strategies to continue performing and reduce the impact of toxic leaders. Employee resilience has been identified as the action-related ability of employees to utilize work resources to ensure constant adaptation in overcoming crisis-related situations (Tonkin et al., 2018). In facing a negative environment due to the presence of a toxic leader, each employee can respond to negative pressure in a different way, in the sense that the stressor or cause of stress is the same, but is responded to with a different response from each individual. There are those who give negative responses in the form of anger, fear, hatred, anxiety, frustration and negative emotions, resulting in burnout and work alienation. However, there are also those who respond to the negative environment with a positive response using coping strategies (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019). This response in facing pressure from a toxic leader is unique because it is on a large scale and if done repeatedly by a group of individuals can be a strategy used to reduce the impact toxic leader. Employee behavior in an effort to survive and adapt to a toxic leader while still performing needs to be understood as a crisis incident phenomenon in the organization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employee Performance: The important role of leader

Leadership is very important for organizations (Lestari et al., 2021), leaders play a critical role in helping groups, organizations and society to achieve goals. In reality, leaders can influence

morale and job satisfaction, security, quality of work life and the level of achievement of an organization (Boddy, 2023). The results of research conducted by the Andersen Consulting Institute for Strategic Change, the share value of a company with good leadership grew by 900% in a period of 10 years, compared to companies with poor leadership which only experienced 74% growth in the same period. Thomas Stewart in his writings stated, "If you were forced to choose one factor that made a big change, choose the leadership factor. In Warren Buffet's terms, people choose the painter, not the painting," (Bennis, 2005). Leadership qualities can encourage someone to have a successful and happy career, because job satisfaction comes from leadership (Nierenberg et al., 2017). However, employees feel that many leaders fail to develop leadership skills and the main reason for employee failure is weak leadership. In other words, we need more and better leaders (Lussier, 2002). Based on this, we can understand that leadership greatly determines employee performance, even on a larger scale, leadership greatly influences the success of the organization. How leaders' attitudes can increase employee motivation or actually weaken and destroy employee potential.

2.2 Toxic Leader

Toxic leadership is a distinctive combination of detrimental qualities, characteristics and psychological traits that result from a leader. Smith and Fredricks-Lowman (2020) argue that toxic leaders are very detrimental to employees and organizations. Understanding a toxic leader can be complicated, because some employees will consider and support him as a savior leader for the organization, while others find the toxic leader's actions troublesome. This may happen because the personal goals of some of these employees can be achieved with the presence of a toxic leader, or there is a tendency for toxic leaders to create groups/colonies within the team who agree with their actions, thereby ignoring other employees outside their group.

Toxic leadership is a mechanism where leaders cause severe and difficult-to-repair damage to subordinates and their organizations, due to their negative behavior or dysfunctional individual characteristics (Milosevic et al., 2020). Previous studies have defined toxic leadership as a multidimensional construct to capture different psychometric properties and related traits (Dobs et al., 2019). The research suggests that the intensity of controlled situations, toxic leaders' intentionality and dysfunctional nature will color their decisions and involvement. Considering the aspects of toxic leadership, several factors have been identified as follows: (1) toxic leader intentionality, a toxic leader can intentionally hurt subordinates for the sake of their achievements (sacrificing other people); (2) the degree of toxicity or toxicity of their actions, which may vary under different conditions or pressures; (3) the dysfunctional actions they carry out may be due to ignorance or irresponsible involvement, as well as substantial incompetence. In this case, the capacity that a leader should have are not found in a toxic leader; (4) and dysfunctional individual qualities that they uphold, seeing employees from the bad side of what they do and can vary in the behavior of different individuals, lack of objectivity in employees (Koo et al., 2022).

Based on these factors, the destructive actions and dysfunction of toxic leaders can vary from one condition to another. As a result, a toxic leader can charm and manipulate his subordinates,

as well as lower their morale because of his involvement with the toxic leader in various destructive actions, the concept is the same as poison that damages his subordinates and group so that he can become the next toxic leader.

Toxic leaders are leaders who are involved in one or several actions against their subordinates, including (1) Deliberately discouraging, disturbing, excluding, unapproachable or troublesome, (2) Carrying out unethical actions, and (3) Consciously maintain in their subordinates the impression of the leader's authority and undermine the subordinate's abilities (Hattab et al., 2021). Toxic leaders often develop personalities that blame and pass the blame onto their subordinates. Toxic leadership is leader behavior that is characterized by violence, authoritarianism, narcissism, self-promotion and unpredictable behavior (Schmidt and Hanges, 2008). Counterproductive Work Behavior is destructive work behavior displayed by employees and this behavior is dangerous for the organization and members (Sackett and DeVore, 2002). Toxic leadership may increase employee intentions to quit, because toxic leaders can endanger employee welfare and increase employee dissatisfaction (Mehta and Maheswari, 2013). Several scholars have suggested that toxic leaders have a detrimental impact on employee performance (Behery et al., 2018; Mehta and Maheswari, 2013; Zaabi et al., 2018).

Toxic leadership has the potential to stimulate a toxic and destructive climate by climbing the organizational hierarchical ladder, where toxic leaders can become more powerful and influential. Any form of bad behavior from a leader will trigger counterproductive behavior in subordinates. Under stressful situations and lacking resources, employees may retaliate against their leaders by displaying counterproductive behavior (Kim and Shapiro, 2008; Lian et al., 2014)

2.3 Coping Response

The response of employees in facing the negative environment created by toxic leaders is very important to understand. On the other hand, there is still little research that explores the unique forms and hidden aspects of toxic leadership. Although much of this research has demonstrated the destructive effects of poor leadership on employee outcomes (Fosse et al., 2019; Mackey et al., 2021), different countries and cultures show some inconsistent results. For example, the high power possessed by leaders causes employees to still tolerate abuse or destructive actions carried out and even tend to approach leaders (Peltokorpi, 2019). The responses made by employees in response to pressure from toxic leaders and strategies to reduce their impact are very interesting. Coping is a response/strategy aimed at reducing physical, emotional and psychological burdens related to daily events or discomfort that cause stress (Nadia et al., 2020; Bhandarker & Rai, 2019).

The stress response can be seen in various aspects (Nadia et al., 2020), namely (1) Physiological response, can be characterized by increased blood pressure, heart rate, pulse rate, and respiratory system; (2) Cognitive response, which can be seen through disruption of an individual's cognitive processes, such as thoughts becoming confused, decreased concentration, repetitive thoughts and unnatural thoughts; (3) Emotional responses, can appear very widely, involving emotions that individuals may experience, such as fear, anxiety and anger; (4)

Behavioral responses can be divided into fight, namely fighting a stressful situation, and flight by avoiding a stressful situation.

Coping is an act of constant cognitive change and is an attempt to overcome stressful situations both internally and externally which are considered to burden or exceed the individual's resources, without paying attention to the consequences of the pressure (). Effective coping is coping that helps someone to tolerate and accept stressful situations and not worry about pressure that they cannot control (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In coping strategies, there are two strategies that can be taken, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Tailor, 1991). *Problem-focused coping* include confrontative coping, seeking social support, and plantful problem solving. Confrontative coping is an attempt to change a situation that is considered stressful by aggressive means, high levels of anger and risk taking. Seeking social support, namely efforts to obtain emotional comfort and information assistance from other people. Plantful problem solving, efforts to change situations that are considered pressing in a careful, gradual and analytical way. *Emotion-focused coping* consist of self control, distancing, positive reappraisal, accepting responsibility, and escape or avoidance. Self control, efforts to regulate feelings when facing stressful situations. Distancing, trying not to get involved in problems, such as avoiding problems as if nothing had happened or creating a positive outlook such as treating problems as jokes. Positive reappraisal, an effort to find positive meaning from problems by focusing on self-development, usually also involving matters of a religious nature. Accepting responsibility, an effort to realize one's own responsibility for the problems one faces and try to accept it to make things better. This strategy is good, especially if the problem occurs because of one's own thoughts and actions. However, this strategy is not good if the individual should not be responsible for the problem. Escape or avoidance, an attempt to overcome a stressful situation by running away from the situation by avoiding it and switching to other things, such as eating, drinking, smoking.

Based on the occurred phenomena and literature reviews in previous research, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do employees respond if they have a toxic leader?

RQ2: What coping strategies do employees use to reduce the impact of toxic leaders?

3. Research Method

Research Context. This research focuses on employee strategies in dealing with toxic leadership that occurs in one of the Public Organization in Indonesia, X Regional Organizations. This condition may occur because employees tend to survive when receiving toxic leaders and behave strategically so that they can still achieve performance or develop themselves using various systems. assessment given by direct leadership. In this case, employees cannot choose an authorized leader, and the career ladder system is determined hierarchically.

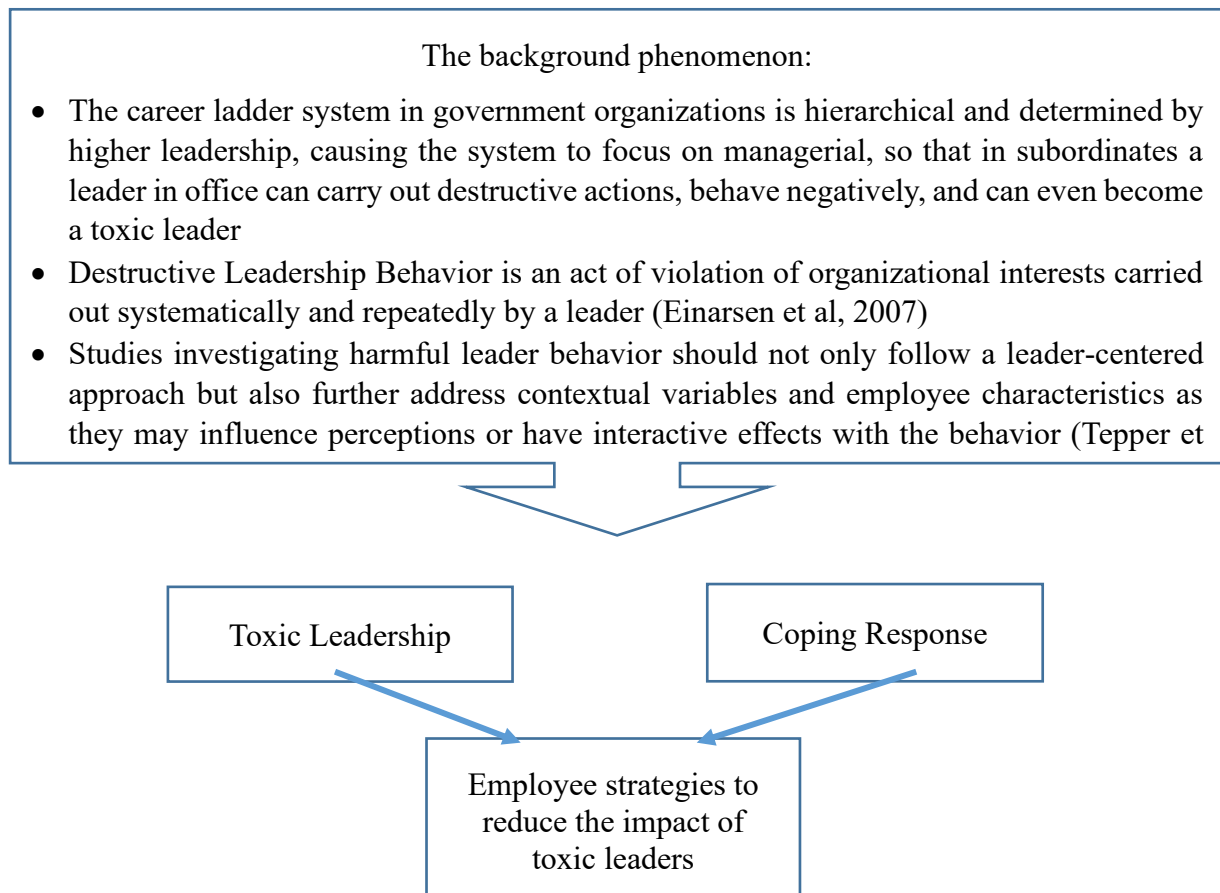


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Critical Incident Technique (CIT). The research was conducted using a qualitative approach with the CIT (Critical Incident Technique) strategy. Toxic leaders have a detrimental impact on employee performance (Behery et al, 2018; Mehta and Maheswari, 2013; Zaabi et al, 2018) so they are critical incidents in organizations because they play a big role in the sustainability of the organization and there are psychological aspects that must be explored in terms of response. employee. CIT is a procedure used to facilitate unusual or unpleasant incidents, which in this case is an employee's strategy for dealing with toxic leaders (Gremier, 2004). The Critical Incident Technique approach was used to answer the problem formulation following the procedure carried out by Grace (2007) which was adapted to the context of toxic leadership. The data collection method used was in-depth interviews with several informants. This method was used to get more comprehensive answers to the interview guidelines to make informants more comfortable expressing the strategies used in dealing with toxic leaders.

Toxic leadership is one of critical incident happened in organizations, because it will affect the performance among organizational members. Toxic leaders referred to in this research are leaders who carry out negative actions according to theoretical studies regarding the definition

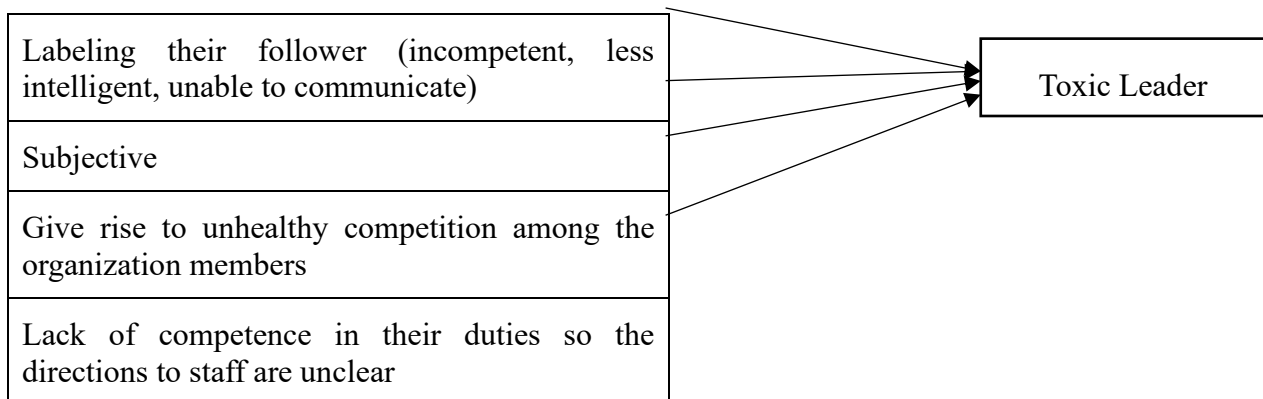
of toxic leadership that implemented in Public Organizations. The strategy that will be studied is the ability of civil servant to survive and behave in the face of toxic leaders and reduce their impact so that they continue to perform.

Sampling Design. The population of this research is civil servant in one of the Public Organization in Indonesia, X Regional Organizations, who have worked for one year or more. The sample that will be taken from this research is a number of informants between 10 - 15 people with data collection techniques using in-depth interviews so that the data obtained reaches saturation point and repeats itself with previous data that has been entered. The sampling technique in this research was the snowball sampling method by conducting interviews with a number of informants based on their knowledge (Cho and Palmer, 2013), where the researchers determined that the informants were employees who thought their leader's behavior was destructive and supported by triangulation of data in the form of assignment orders and the informants' social media. . The Assignment Order is a triangulation of data that can be used to see whether the informant is still assigned and has the trust of the toxic leader or is actually in conflict with the toxic leader so that he does not get the assignment, which of course interferes with the informant's performance achievements.

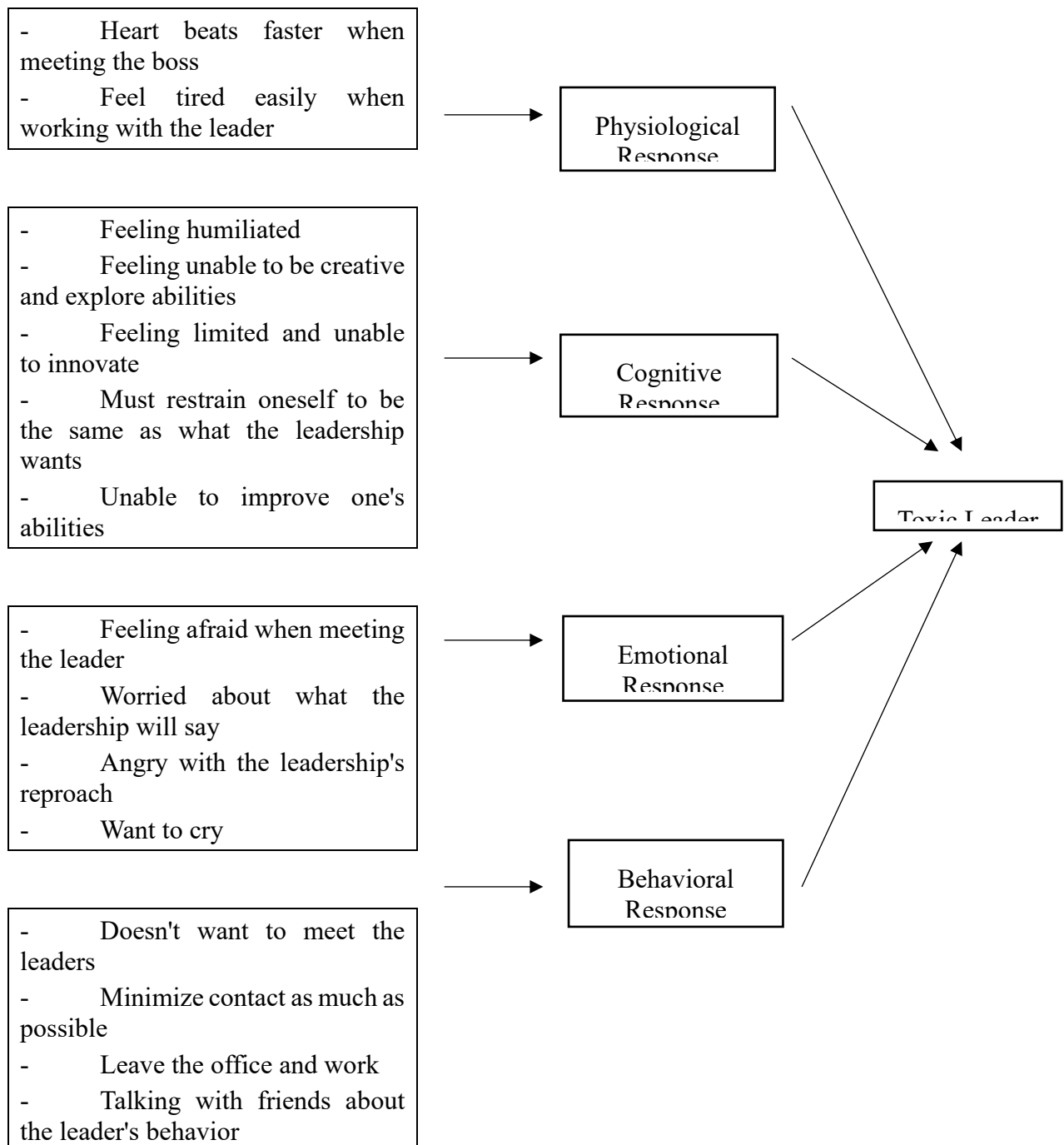
Data Analysis Technique. The data analysis technique used is content analysis. Content analysis is the most appropriate analysis technique because it was used by previous researchers who used the CIT approach (e.g. Nadia et al., 2020; Grace, 2007; Gremler, 2004). Critical incidents identified in the research are then categorized into first order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate dimensions, thus building a new framework for the phenomena that occur, in this case the impact that occurs on employee and organizational performance with the presence of toxic leaders, as well as strategies. employees in dealing with these conditions.

4. Finding and Discussion

Employee Response in Dealing with Toxic Leaders . According to the results, the characteristic of the toxic leader are as follows:



From the results of in-depth interviews with informants, it was found that employees who have toxic leaders tend to persist with the following responses:



Coping Strategy to deal with Toxic Leader. As previously stated, employees are implementers in the organization and hierarchically must be loyal to the leaders above them. With the assessment of the work system provided by the direct superior, the immediate superior has control over assessing the subordinates and is closely related to the compensation received.

Therefore, based on the results of interviews with respondents, it can be concluded that not all staff react to toxic leaders. A government performance system that does not really pursue targets allows some staff to be resistant to their leaders, especially those who are toxic. They choose to ignore, perform poorly to avoid obligations, and try to be neutral and avoid direct involvement with toxic leaders, so they spend more time outside the office. However, when they have to come into direct contact with a toxic leader, the adaptive behavior carried out by employees are Problem-Focus Coping and Emotion-Focus Coping.

Problem-Focus Coping among others, namely: (1) try to understand the toxic leader, communicate openly and explore the possibilities of why the person concerned behaves like that. Slowly communicate his wishes and whether we are able to fulfill them, but still with the principles we adhere to; (2) try to understand the characteristics of employees expected by the leadership and if there is an opportunity to convey that their behavior affects our performance and that of other employees and convey that the input to their behavior is sympathetic support from subordinates who want their superiors to be better; (3) seek support from colleagues or people outside the organization to maintain competence and professionalism to stay updated. Join a professional group or community related to your main tasks and functions in a government organization to share experiences and gain new perspectives; (4) remain professional in interacting with toxic leaders. Don't let toxic leaders irritate us, but we should irritate them and be aware that their behavior has a bad impact on the organization. Avoid direct conflict or bringing down the good name of a toxic leader in front of the forum. Focus on work, carry out responsibilities as best as possible, and don't let their behavior affect the quality of work; (5) If there is an incident or inappropriate behavior from a toxic leader, it is important to document in detail what happened, including the date, time, and description of the incident. This can be an important note if you need evidence to report the situation to your supervisor or other parties who might blame you as an employee; (6) If the relationship with the toxic leader does not improve and the impact continues, you can contact the human resources department or higher management in the organization to share your concerns. Provide relevant evidence or documentation and request that appropriate action be taken.

Emotion-Focus Coping among others, namely: (1) try to manage your feelings when facing a toxic leader by showing a calm and professional response, not easily provoked by harsh words or bullying; (2) look for positive meaning from the conditions you are facing, how this condition will mature you in facing many challenges and become a valuable experience so that in the future you will not become a toxic leader for the organization; (3) try not to get involved in problems and treat problems with toxic leaders as just a joke, so you can be more relaxed; (4) realize that toxic leaders will not always be in the organization. In government organizations, staff are the real owners of an organization, because employee turnover across regional apparatus does not occur much, except for promotions or transfers and the amount is no more than 20% of the total employees. This is inversely proportional to the turnover or rotation of leaders which occurs more frequently. So, it must be ingrained that staff are the "homeowners" in an organization so they must love their home more, whoever the leader happens to be assigned to Public Organizations.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that employees who have toxic leaders tend to experience various negative physiological and emotional responses. They feel tension, fatigue, feel humiliated, limited in creativity and innovation, feel afraid, angry, and want to avoid. However, in dealing with these situations, employees also adopt adaptation strategies that include focusing on solving problems, communicating openly with leaders, seeking support from coworkers and professional groups, remaining professional in interactions, documenting incidents, and involving the human resources department or relevant management, higher if necessary. Apart from that, employees also adopt emotional management strategies, such as maintaining calm, seeking positive meaning from situations, not getting involved in problems, and realizing that toxic leaders are not always in the organization. In a government context, where employee turnover tends to be low, employees have an important role as the true owners of the organization and can develop an attitude of love for the organization to overcome toxic leaders and ensure better continuity. It is important for employees to maintain personal well-being, communicate wisely, and take appropriate action to protect themselves and the interests of the organization in the face of toxic leadership.

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