

# Conformer or colluder? The human resource professional's contribution to toxic leadership



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**Orientation:** There is a growing body of knowledge on the role of human resource (HR) professionals in workplace bullying, but their role in perpetuating a toxic leadership culture in organisations remains unscrutinised. Human resource professionals are uniquely positioned to influence toxic leadership styles as they are required to cultivate and sustain the organisational leadership culture.

**Research purpose:** The aim of this study was to identify gaps in HR practices that could contribute to toxic leadership in organisations.

**Motivation of the study:** The inherent role conflict of the HR professional and competing demands from organisational stakeholders are likely to create toxic outcomes.

**Research approach/design and method:** A phenomenological study was carried out at a South African organisation to gain insight into the practices of HR professionals. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and the key findings of the study were identified through a thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** Three themes emerged that contribute to creating gaps in HR practices that support toxic leadership: *toxic HR practices, challenges faced by HR professionals and business results at any cost.*

**Practical/managerial implications:** The findings suggest a need to alleviate the inherent role conflict experienced by HR professionals, so that their contributions to toxic leadership are minimised.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study contributes to the literature on toxic leadership by expounding on the role of the human resources professionals (HRP) and gaps in their practices that contribute to toxic leadership. Suggested guidelines and recommendations are offered to address the gaps in HR practices.

**Keywords:** toxic leadership; human resource professional; paradox; ethics; human resource practices.

## Introduction

There is a vast amount of research on positive leadership and its effects on organisational leadership. At the same time, research into negative leadership has increasingly received the attention of human capital development researchers in the last decade (Neves & Schyns, 2018). Negative leadership may be described as abusive, destructive, dark, dysfunctional, bullying, derailed, tyrannical and toxic (Nyberg 2016:62; Roter, 2017:7). A synopsis of some prevailing definitions of negative leadership is worth noting: Shufelt and Longenecker (2017:2) refer to toxic leadership as 'a combination of self-centred attitudes, motivations and behaviours that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organisation and mission performance'. Toxic leaders 'consistently use dysfunctional behaviours to deceive, intimidate, coerce or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves'. Another pertinent definition of toxic leadership is espoused by Lipman-Blumen (2005:2) who refers to toxic leaders as destructive in their behaviours and notes that their 'dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics can inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organisations, communities and even the nations that they lead'. Similarly, Mehta and Maheshwari (2014:20) describe toxic leadership as 'a series of purposeful and deliberate behaviours and acts of a leader that disrupt the effective functioning of the organisation and are intended to manoeuvre, deceive, intimidate and humiliate others with the objective of personal gains'.

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From the above descriptions, most narratives of negative leadership explain the behaviours of the leaders and the consequences of such behaviours may be dire if no appropriate intervening measures are put in place. In this article, the term 'toxic' leadership is preferred as it is a poison that spreads slowly in the organisation and leaves enduring negative effects that are not immediately visible (Singh et al., 2017).

The primary focus of the study was to examine how human resources professionals (HRPs) may contribute towards toxic leadership in organisations. Many authors suggest that the HRP is well positioned to identify and address issues of toxicity in the organisation. Ulrich et al. (2008:5–6) contend that HRPs are specialists in people management processes and will provide advice to others on how to achieve results through effective people practices. According to Reimer et al. (2017), the human resource (HR) function plays a central role in defining and developing the organisation's leadership and has first-hand knowledge of leadership gaps. This viewpoint is further expanded by Catley et al. (2012) who add that the HRP is responsible for several organisational practices and processes that are key to the prevention and management of toxic leadership. Webster et al. (2016:189) highlight the employee wellness role of HRPs, which includes identifying stressed employees attributable to abusive supervision. Mokgolo (2017:133) argues further, in agreement with Webster et al. (2016), that HRPs perform multiple roles to address and manage workplace bullying, such as trustworthy listener, impartial investigator, management advisor and facilitator or enforcer of management decisions.

Additionally, HRPs work as strategic business partners to assist in moulding and building future leaders who drive business strategy (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). A leadership culture is created when HRPs and business leaders continuously display and drive behaviours of developing other leaders (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Over time, these repetitive behaviours form part of the culture, which encourages positive or toxic leadership in the organisation. Implicit in this assertion is that HR practices in leadership development must be effectively managed, so that toxic behaviours are recognised and addressed before they have a significant impact on the organisation's culture.

It is worth noting that HRPs can be placed in a paradoxical situation where they overextend themselves in one role at the expense of another (Gerpott, 2015:222). For instance, the HRP may be required to represent management interests while promoting employee advocacy. In an effort to affirm the HR function as a valued contributor in the organisation, the HRP may avoid addressing the employee advocate role to appease the management agenda (Fox & Cowan, 2015; Gerpott, 2015). These paradoxical situations could have the potential for toxic outcomes as the HRP is required to fulfil both roles that appear to conflict with each other.

## Research purpose

The available literature on organisational leadership provides extensive details on types of toxic leadership in the workplace. However, there are less data on the role of HRPs in aiding toxic leadership. The research problem that the study attempts to address is the inadequate data on how HRPs may contribute to toxic leadership in organisations. Some research exists regarding the role of HRPs and their attempts to address workplace bullying (Fox & Cowan, 2015; Harrington et al., 2015; Mokgolo, 2017), but, in general, the contributory role of HR in toxic leadership is under-researched in South Africa. The study aims to offer a contribution to the existing body of knowledge on toxic leadership. More specifically, the study intended to develop an in-depth understanding of how HR practices can contribute to toxic leadership by examining the practices of HRPs working at a South African-based petrochemical organisation.

## Literature review

The 'toxic triangle' developed by Padilla et al. (2007) was used as a conceptual framework to guide this study. Padilla et al. (2007) refer to a convergence of the leaders' behaviours and traits, susceptible followers and favourable environments as parameters for toxic leadership to take effect. These elements and the role of HRPs are discussed in more detail below.

### Toxic leader behaviours

Toxic leaders are described based on their destructive behaviours and typology and outcomes that are inflicted on the people and organisations under their leadership. According to Padilla et al. (2007:182), the characteristics of a destructive leader include, *inter alia*, 'charisma, a personalised need for power, narcissism, negative life history and an ideology of hate'. These leaders have charismatic personalities and are ambitious in the pursuit of their goals. They tend to seek out positions of power and influence where their self-importance can be elevated. They justify the need for power by identifying a perceived or real external threat to influence others to follow them.

Charisma is associated with transformational leadership and has, thus, garnered a positive perception as one of the traits of effective leaders. However, Padilla et al. (2007) argue that charismatic leaders who have a selfish orientation can articulate a vision that enhances their personal power, which in turn can lead to destructive outcomes if their behaviours are not properly managed. De Vries (2018) further argues that a combination of 'three nightmare personality traits', namely dishonesty, disagreeableness and low conscientiousness, support a leader's propensity for a toxic leadership style. Consequently, a combination of these personality traits creates a fertile ground for toxic leadership to emerge.

## A typology perspective of toxic leaders

The dark triad of personality refers to three traits, namely narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, which are associated with toxic leadership. Narcissistic leaders are characterised by a sense of entitlement, arrogance, self-absorption and a need to be the centre of attention (Fascia, 2018). They create positive first impressions, especially in selection contexts (Nevicka et al., 2018). Over time, their exploitative side is revealed and people develop negative opinions of them (Schmid et al., 2018). Machiavellianism refers to a 'socially malevolent' and 'insincere character' aimed at self-promotion while 'interacting with others in an aggressive way' (Kipfelsberger & Kark, 2018:117). Machiavellians use social manipulation tactics to control situations and will oscillate between counterproductive behaviours and pro-organisational behaviours, provided these support their self-serving goals (Belschak et al., 2016). Psychopaths differ from narcissists and Machiavellians where these individuals lack a conscience (Kipfelsberger & Kark, 2018) and are devoid of feelings of shame, guilt or remorse (Kets de Vries, 2012). According to Furtner et al. (2017), psychopathy is strongly associated with bullying behaviours in contrast to Machiavellianism and narcissism. Furthermore, Mathieu and Babiak (2016:105) confirmed that 'leaders with psychopathic traits are inclined to abusive supervision', which negatively influences employees' job satisfaction and increases turnover intentions.

A meta-analytic study by O'Boyle et al. (2014) confirmed that the dark triad personalities were strongly associated with low agreeableness from the Five-Factor Model. In support of this view, De Vries (2018:13) argues that the most extreme leader profile is a combination of high extraversion, low emotionality and what he refers to as the 'three nightmare traits', amounting to a 'narcissistic-psychopathic leadership' profile (De Vries, 2018:13).

## Susceptible followers

Susceptible followers are described as either conformers or colluders who support the agenda of a toxic leader. Conformers consent to the authority of toxic leaders and obey the instructions of the leader because they are vulnerable to the leader's influence. According to Thoroughgood et al. (2012:903), conformers are characterised by 'harbouring unfulfilled basic needs, negative core self-evaluations and low psychological maturity'. As such, conformers will abide by the leader's rules and passively follow them to preserve their organisational status and avoid the threat of unemployment. Nevicka et al. (2018) agree that followers with low self-esteem and low self-evaluation are more vulnerable to abusive behaviours. They would tolerate the leader's aggressive behaviour towards them and conform to the leader's expectations. Similarly, Nyberg (2016) argues that conformers may not endorse the leader's perspectives but would respond in a manner that reduces threats and increases rewards for themselves. The

conformers' actions are, thus, driven by a need to eliminate negative consequences for themselves (Padilla et al., 2007). A slightly different perspective offered by Mergen and Ozbilgin (2020) is that followers with 'a high personal uncertainty' would favour toxic leaders as they provide a sense of belonging, direction and certainty. The followers are enticed by the toxic leader's worldview, which creates a compelling vision that conditions followers to engage in unethical behaviours.

In contrast, colluders are characterised by ambition, selfishness and tend to share similar perspectives and values as that of the toxic leaders whom they follow (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). They will promote and contribute to the vision of toxic leaders to achieve their personal goals.

These followers play a bystander role by either ignoring the bullying behaviours or withholding critical information that could save the victim from the bullying circumstances (Nyberg, 2016). Additionally, followers who possess Machiavellian tendencies are synonymous with greed and a high need for status (Laguda, 2020). They will exploit situations orchestrated by the toxic leaders and participate in unethical acts that can harm others as well as the organisation (Belschak et al., 2016). These actions are driven by a self-serving need to strengthen their organisational power and positioning, with no regard for the negative consequences to others. Based on this discussion, followers would, therefore, have different reasons for following a toxic leader.

## Environmental context

Environmental factors such as 'instability, cultural values, a lack of checks and balances and perceived threats' can create a perfect context for toxic leadership to manifest, if left unchecked (Padilla et al., 2007:185). Organisational restructures are cited as periods of intense change that can threaten continued employment (Otto et al., 2018). Toxic leaders provide a sense of security during turbulent times, especially when followers are struggling to manage their own fears about the changes (Nyberg, 2016).

According to Padilla et al. (2007), ineffective systems and weak internal control procedures facilitate a conducive environment where toxic leader behaviours can flourish. This is notably the case when leaders have a degree of freedom or discretion in their decision-making practices (Laguda, 2020). Furthermore, unlimited authority can result in the abuse of power, especially when there are no checks and balances to hold leaders accountable. Another assertion by Laguda (2020) is that organisational cultures underscore the importance of masculinity, collectivism, high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which seem to support toxic leadership.

The diamond situational characteristics of negativity, adversity and deception advocated by Rauthmann et al.

(2014) further reinforce the argument that environmental factors influence toxic leadership. Leaders who engage in counterproductive behaviours have a negative influence on followers' ability to create meaning in their work and derive a sense of fulfilment (Kipfelsberger & Kark, 2018). In addition, Machiavellian leaders are especially drawn to circumstances where they can engage in deception to manipulate people or events to their advantage (Belschak et al., 2016). Lastly, followers experience adversity when they stand up to toxic leaders resulting in mundane job assignments or diminished work outputs because of deliberately reduced resources (Wu et al., 2018).

### **The paradoxical nature of the human resource role**

Researchers have discussed how HRPs can experience competing demands in the roles of strategic partner and employee advocate, which led to criticism of the profession and tension for the HRP (Gerpott, 2015; Marchington, 2015; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014). For example, HRPs must support business objectives as strategic partners and promote the employee's interests in another role (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014) while building trust among their stakeholders as credible activists (Ulrich et al., 2017). Admittedly, Heizmann and Fox (2017) believe that HRPs have paid little attention to the employee advocate role, because their efforts were primarily directed at establishing themselves as credible business partners. Scholars also note that HRPs cannot diminish the employee advocate role, as the employee group remains a key stakeholder for the HRP (Daniel, 2017; Marchington, 2015). Given these paradoxes, the HRP remains perplexed to mediate between advocating for the employees' interests and managing the leaders' expectations of performance standards that are required to achieve the organisational goals.

### **The role of human resource in promoting an ethical culture**

Ethics in the workplace requires HRPs to distinguish between what is right and wrong and what is good and bad (Erasmus, 2018:66). The HR function must manage ethical challenges pertaining to the relationship between the employer and employee, including discrimination issues, counterproductive work behaviours such as fraud and corruption and unfair employment policies and practices (Erasmus, 2018). The HRP is also required to role model and uphold ethical behaviours in the organisation, so that employees know what ethical behaviour looks like (Parkes & Davis, 2013). In this context, the HRP can play different ethical roles in the organisation.

Simões et al. (2018) contend that ethical dilemmas arise because of the multiple roles expected of the HRP. In addition, the environmental context and how unethical behaviour is defined can influence the HRP's judgement (Simões et al., 2018). Environments that place a strong emphasis on cost reduction and financial profitability tend to influence HR to

marginalise employee issues (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). In support of this view, Simões et al. (2018) argue that HR is not acting unethically but rather following a different ethical agenda by prioritising the organisation's financial objectives. Parkes and Davis (2013) observe that HRPs are inclined to be ethically assertive in their work practices if they follow a strong HR ethical code.

However, Csillag (2019) argues that the HRP may lack knowledge or even doubt their ability to effectively deal with ethical breaches, preferring to remain silent. Parkes and Davis (2013) point out that blowing the whistle on unethical behaviour is stressful for individuals, which implies that the HRP would tend to overlook the unethical acts to protect themselves. Consequently, the HRP may decide to be silent or conform to such circumstances to preserve their continued employment. This lack of inaction and doubt can create morally mute behaviour from the HRP (Csillag, 2019).

## **Research design**

### **Research approach**

The research paradigm for this study was based on social constructivism, which is concerned with 'individuals seeking out knowledge about the world in which they live and work' (Creswell, 2007:20). This qualitative approach was preferred because the researcher wanted to elicit different perspectives of individuals who were exposed to toxic experiences and to 'understand the subjective meaning of people's experiences' (Creswell, 2007:24). This implies that researchers do not seek answers in a rigid manner (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), but rather through the varied perspectives of people affected by the social phenomenon in question. The constructivist researcher is, therefore, reliant on the participants' opinions of a social phenomenon.

A phenomenological design was used as perceptions of real-life experiences are important to assess how toxic leadership could emerge from HR practices. The researcher wanted to obtain information about the 'lived experiences' of HRPs and ascertain how they have interpreted these experiences. Furthermore, the researcher also wanted to understand their experiences in contributing to the phenomenon. As such, the study intended to examine the practices of HRPs working at a South African-based petrochemical organisation.

### **Research methods**

#### **Research sample**

A stratified purposive sampling method is a non-probability sampling method used to select the research participants and to determine whether the participants had differing views on the research topic. This method is described as dividing the population into smaller groups or strata where each group is fairly homogenous (Sharma, 2017).

After informed consent was obtained from the participants, they were further screened based on a set of selection criteria for inclusion in the study. Participants were eligible to be

included if they satisfied the following criteria: (1) HRP's who have a 3-year post-matric qualification in the domain of human resources or industrial/organisational psychology or a related field. (2) The HRP must have at least 7-year experience working as a human resource professional. (3) The HRP must have worked autonomously and co-ordinated or managed an end-to-end HR process without the need for constant supervision.

A stratified sample of 10 HRP's was emailed, comprising a selection of participants at the junior, middle and senior management levels of the organisation. A total of eight HRP's consented to assist in the study from the organisation. Through the process of snowballing and using the researcher's professional network, an additional seven people, who were external to the organisation, were approached to participate in the research process. These participants occupied similar management levels but came from different industries. The rationale for interviewing these participants was to corroborate any findings from the initial data sources to illuminate a theme or opinion (Creswell, 2013). This served as a validity check, known as data triangulation, where the researcher was able to review several data sources to confirm the research findings and ensure data saturation (Fusch et al., 2018). A total of 15 participants, comprising six males and nine females, were interviewed as outlined in Table 1. Participants varied in their qualifications and years of experience working in the HR profession.

### Data collection

Semi-structured interviews are a common data gathering method used for qualitative studies as it allows pre-determined questions to be answered to satisfy the research questions (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A semi-structured interview also promotes flexibility during the interview and allows for the participants to speak more openly about their lived experiences. An individual meeting request was sent to each participant with a link to attend the online interview. All the interviews were recorded using online meeting

platforms and lasted between 45 and 60 min. The researcher prepared an interview guide with pre-determined questions, to facilitate the discussion with each participant, allowing the sequence and structure of the interviews to vary among the participants.

The researcher made use of follow-up questions to clarify any points, and all the participants were provided an opportunity to ask for more details about the study and address any concerns pertaining to the information they shared. The interview recordings were then transcribed and saved in a secure cloud-based folder.

### Data analysis

A qualitative study requires data to be analysed in a manner that creates order and structure to the volume of data collected. A thematic analysis was conducted to make sense of the data and create structure from the interview responses. This method consists of preparing and organising the data for analysis, followed by interpreting the data into codes and themes 'and finally representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion' (Creswell, 2013:180). Before commencing with the analysis, the transcripts were reviewed based on the recordings to ensure correctness and anonymise any details referring to people or places. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, their names were substituted with alphanumeric characters such as A1, A2, etc. for the participants of the researched organisation and B1, B2, etc. for the participants outside of the organisation.

The coding of the data commenced towards the end of the data collection process, and this process was facilitated using the qualitative data analysis software, *Quirkos*. Coding assists the researcher to reduce the raw data to manageable sections as applicable to the research questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). All the transcripts from the organisation were coded first to identify any similarities or uniqueness that had to be accounted for in the interpretation of the results. Thereafter, the data collected from the external participants were coded.

TABLE 1: Profile of participants.

Participant	Race and gender	Qualification	Experience (in years)	Management level	Industry
A1	White female	Honours degree	18	Senior	-
A2	White female	Honours degree	20	Middle	-
A3	Black female	Bachelor's degree	15	Middle	-
A4	Black female	Master's degree	20	Senior	-
A5	Black male	LLB National Diploma	20	Senior	-
A6	Black male	Diploma	8	Junior	-
A7	Mixed race male	Diploma	8	Junior	-
A8	Black female	Diploma	20	Junior	-
B1	Black male	Bachelor's degree	16	Middle	Quick Service Restaurants
B2	White female	Bachelor's degree	8	Senior	Pharmaceutical
B3	Black male	Master's degree	14	Senior	Financial Services
B4	Indian female	Honours degree	15	Middle	FMCG: Retail
B5	Mixed race male	Honours degree	19	Middle	Retail Services
B6	Indian female	Bachelor's degree	25	Senior	Financial Services
B7	Black female	Bachelor's degree	12	Junior	Quick Service Restaurants

LLB, Bachelor of Laws; FMCG, Fast Moving Consumable Goods.

Catalogues were created from the interpreted data by grouping repeated patterns or relationships into themes. The cataloguing process aims to reduce the volume of data into manageable sections, so that the researcher is able to develop higher-level insights and establish a theme (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). It is important to note that the analysis of themes extends beyond reporting on the frequency of themes and verbatim reports on the participants' feedback. Instead, the researcher is required to interpret what the data mean or could mean and clarify these interpretations (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Where the themes were quite extensive, they were further divided into sub-themes to highlight specific aspects of the broader theme.

### Ethical considerations

Permission was obtained from the head of HR to approach the individuals to participate in the research study. At the onset of each interview, the participants were reminded of informed consent and required to sign a letter acknowledging that their participation was voluntary, and they were aware of the intended purpose of the research. All participants received individual meeting requests with a link to attend the online interview. Once the transcriptions were completed, the recordings were deleted to protect the anonymity of the participants, and any reference to individual names was replaced or deleted in the transcripts. Lastly, the interview transcriptions were encrypted with a password and stored on a cloud-based server that only the researcher could access.

## Results

A total of three core themes emerged from the data analysis: *toxic HR practices; challenges faced by the HR professionals and business results at any cost*. The purpose of the themes was to address the question, 'How do HR practices contribute to toxic leadership in organisations?' The themes were supported by data from the transcripts and any existing literature that was reviewed.

### Toxic human resource practices

The toxic HR practices covered issues such as bias, unfairness and inconsistent HR practices where the HRP may be pressurised to engage in unethical actions or be inclined to abuse their authority. The discussions with the participants suggested that HRPs are not always consistent in their practices to ensure organisational leaders are subjected to similar processes as compared to the rest of employees. This is evident in the participants' statements below:

'I would say the people pleasing the, wanting to be liked and able to put your foot down is causing these kinds of inconsistency, in how we address issues. If one person deviates, they get a written warning. If somebody else does the same deviation, they go to a disciplinary and are dismissed.' (Participant A3)

Another participant referred to bias that HRPs would have because of relationships with the stakeholders:

'Our reluctance to say, no, in some instances, you know, our reluctance to say, that's not going to happen. This is the rules and, probably sometimes, because of fear or because of relationships that you have with some of the managers, businesses, or employees, that you might lose your neutrality.' (Participant A4)

These findings are indicative of the biased treatment and inconsistent practices that occur because the HRP wants to create a favourable impression with the organisational leaders and be recognised as a valued business partner (Heizmann & Fox, 2017). Organisational leaders generally evaluate HR's performance because they tend to be the primary users of HR services. The HRP would be inclined to align their HR activities to satisfy the organisational leader's expectations (Gerpott, 2015).

Notably, the findings of inconsistent HR practices mostly related to recruitment and remuneration matters. Erasmus (2018) noted similar findings where recruitment and remuneration practices were ranked among the top HR practices that are most susceptible to unethical behaviours. Participants who raised the issue of inconsistent recruitment and remuneration practices spoke at length about being pressurised by the line managers to circumvent the policy or enforce decisions that were taken without HR consultation. The excerpt from an interview with Participant A3 provides evidence to demonstrate the inconsistent practices, despite employment equity targets that were a company imperative:

'I think recruitment is the biggest one because we, would always basically fight, you know, even though we would have an employment equity plan when we do recruitment, most of the times we deviate from the plan and managers are sometimes not willing to look at people with potential. And they will always go for whoever they basically want irrespective of the impact that it would have on their employment equity figures.'

Remuneration practices were a contentious discussion that evoked strong emotions amongst the participants who spoke about the inconsistencies they experienced. In one instance, Participant B7 referred to the company's poor financial performance, which meant that no salary increases were to be awarded, and yet some staff spoke openly about the increases they received:

'And when you ask questions, you find out that out of three people, only one person was given a salary increase.'

These findings suggest that the HRP is not always included in the decision-making process. In addition, there seems to be no transparency and guiding principles for exceptional situations where staff may be eligible to receive increases. Although it was not easy to attribute the inconsistencies to either the line manager or HRP, it can be inferred that both parties are accountable to demonstrate ethical behaviour in their HR practices.

## Challenges faced by human resource professionals

The challenges faced by the HRP was another theme that emerged from the data analyses and generated two sub-themes, namely personal and professional challenges. Participants expressed a concern for the lack of appreciation of their efforts by organisational leaders and the emotional burden that was associated with the role. Participant A8 explained that there is a perception among the organisational leaders that the HR department does not play a significant role in the organisation:

‘Sometimes I feel as if they feel like HR is not doing anything, let me put it that way because obviously they are on the operation space, and we are on the support side. So sometimes I really feel that our work is not that important.’

These sentiments were shared by other participants who experienced role confusion and questioned whether the HR function created value for the organisation:

‘I believe that the role of HR within the organization need to be clarified and need to be well understood as that of a strategic business partner, rather than that of an afterthought, because most of the time this happens when the role or support provided, is not well understood.’ (Participant B1)

The criticisms of the HRPs work resulted in role ambiguity, thereby leading to the HRPs feeling devalued. Such experiences are stressful for the HRP to contend with. This view is supported by Wu et al. (2018) who cited that role stress is experienced when people are exposed to jobs of increased complexity while working with toxic leaders. Consequently, working with a toxic leader is considered an environmental stressor, which is likely to induce toxic behaviours in the HRP.

Professional challenges emerged primarily from conflicting priorities within the HRP’s role. Most participants referred to the inherent dichotomy of the role because the HRP should uphold the interests of both the organisation and the employees. Participant A5 shared a practical experience of how this dichotomy plays out in reality:

‘We (HR) are expected to do employee engagement. We expected to do employee consultation, induction and tell them about the beautiful company that they’re supposed to be working for. Two weeks later, we are expected to implement section 189 of the same employees. Yeah. So, what that does is, it creates mistrust between HR and the employee.’

In this example, the HRP engaged with staff on the organisation’s attractive employee value proposition and subsequently had to implement a new organisational structure that would potentially result in job losses. These events appear contradictory to one another, and this situation illustrates the dual nature of the HR role where the HRP must fulfil the organisation’s goals as requested by the leadership team and, on the other hand, implement initiatives to promote employee well-being. These circumstances create a false sense of security for employees resulting in distrust of the HRP.

A lack of trust can arise from the HRP’s working relationship with the leadership team and the extent to which employees perceive that the HRP would address their concerns fairly. This was emphasised by participant B1, whose close working relationship with management created the impression that the employee’s concerns would not be addressed objectively:

‘I happened to be perceived as a close person to the operations manager. So, the (employee) was bold enough to even tell me that I’m aware that you are close to this person. So, I do not have a confidence in you that you will resolve my issue amicably.’ (Participant B1)

Any attempts made by the HRP to address unethical or unscrupulous practices displayed by managers usually come at a cost, as explained by Participant B3, ‘with either the HR professional leaving the organisation or being frozen out of key leadership calls as they are seen as a constraint to “quick implementation”’. Consequently, the HRP would prefer the path of least resistance by adopting a follower approach to the leader’s agenda (Thoroughgood et al., 2012), regardless of the potential impact to the employees. These experiences demonstrate that the HRP is conflicted between being a good business partner to management, doing what is right and representing the employees’ interests.

## Business results at any cost

The third theme refers to the behaviours and decisions of the organisational leaders that sometimes go unchallenged. Such decisions are primarily taken to achieve the desired business outcomes. Most of the HRPs interviewed in the organisation were able to successfully challenge the leaders’ behaviours and decisions; however, the HRPs interviewed outside of the organisation were not so fortunate. In some organisations, the HRPs do not have the necessary support structures and require the executive team to ratify any HR decisions. In such situations, organisational leaders would exercise their positional influence to silence the HRP if they were not happy with the decision taken or advice offered. This was evidenced by Participant B7: ‘Once you challenge the line manager or somebody senior than you, it’s like, you’re challenging the powers and you get sidelined’. In some environments, the toxic leader’s behaviours go unchallenged, and unilateral decisions are made without considering the HR perspectives on the matter. This was observed by Participant B2 whose CEO refused to take advice when consolidating the leave policies of three merged entities:

‘And he had decided that management, regardless of how high up or junior, management was entitled to 18 days, and that was it. And it needed to change and explaining to him that there’s a consultation process and they actually have a right to sort of question it. And I was told in no uncertain terms, of course there was particular language used as well, that he does not care.’

Heizmann and Fox (2017) state that a power differential exists between the organisational leaders and the HRP because the HR function is a cost centre that does not make a direct contribution to the organisation’s bottom line. As a result of the power difference, the HRP would feel vulnerable

to challenge the executive decisions, fearing the repercussions would threaten their continued employment.

Organisational leaders demonstrating destructive behaviours are also perceived to not follow HR practices. This may be indicative of the leaders not wanting to expose their incompetence or favouritism of certain employees. Participant B5 explained how one leader would delegate HR-related matters to his deputy manager to conceal his own inexperience in addressing such matters:

'And when all these people then elevate or raise the complaint or the concerns to the manager, who's actually got the authority. He shuts them down. You understand because he's reliant [on the 2IC]. So that's why I'm saying incompetence where a manager doesn't have the skills to do the job.'

The leaders are likely to protect employees who perform work on their behalf to cover up their own incompetence, and such employees are perceived as being favoured. This was highlighted by Milosevic et al. (2019) who described the toxic leaders' attempts to conceal their incompetence in an effort to maintain control. The leaders would go to great lengths to cover up their incompetence, including protecting their employees from disciplinary action.

Other destructive behaviours can manifest as providing incongruent messages to the HRP. These actions paralyse the decision-making of HRPs to the extent that they cannot conclude a matter without the leader's involvement. This was evidenced in the discussion with Participant B2 who could not finalise any employment offers because of the conflicting messages received:

'He would then tell me, offer them this, and send them the letter of appointment. And they [applicants] would come back, and they'd be like, Whoa, that's not what we were promised. We were promised a lot more money. We were promised shares. We were promised a whole lot of things. And I just felt like I was constantly being set up.'

This manipulative behaviour is indicative of dark triad leaders who seek to control situations through incongruent messaging, resulting in frustration for the HRP.

The participants acknowledged that business goals are oftentimes prioritised above HR goals that compel the HRP to compromise on the achievement of HR goals. Participant B2 commented:

'[A]t the end of the day, you unfortunately are balancing the people side of things with the profitability of a company, the first place that companies cut when they're trying to save money, is people.'

In this instance, the HRP must support the business goals to be perceived as a strategic business partner by organisational leaders (Marchington, 2015). These experiences further explicate the duality of the HRP's role where HR practices to support the employee advocate role are marginalised in favour of other business priorities (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Marchington, 2015).

## Discussion

The study concluded that *toxic HR practices, challenges faced by HR professionals and business results at any cost* contribute to gaps in HR practices that support toxic leadership. These themes appear to be reinforced by the inherent dichotomy of the HR role which causes confusion for the HRP.

Toxic practices such as inconsistencies across HR processes are indicative of ineffective systems and weak controls that contribute to environments where toxic leadership can flourish as explained by Padilla et al. (2007). The biased treatment of certain leaders suggests that HRPs would adopt a conformer role to maximise any potential rewards for themselves (Nyberg, 2016) and avoid unwanted stress in reporting the leader's unethical behaviour (Parkes & Davis, 2013). Some of the challenges experienced by HRPs include questioning their self-worth because of their organisational value being questioned, making them vulnerable to abusive leaders (Nevecká et al., 2018). As a result, HRPs concede to relationships with toxic leaders hoping to develop a renewed sense of purpose (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2020). It was also noted that HRPs are exposed to negative and adversarial work environments (Rauthman et al., 2014), where HRPs are distrusted by employees and also criticised by the leaders. These contextual factors influence the spread of toxic leadership in organisations. The adversarial conditions are further escalated when HRPs do challenge the leaders, resulting in them being excluded from critical HR conversations (Wu et al., 2018). Where the HRP must administer HR decisions in organisational cultures dominated by patriarchy and high-power distance (Laguda, 2020), the cycle of the leader's power abuse is intensified. The HRP is likely to rationalise such decisions, to the extent that it supports the environmental norms and one of their dual roles (Simões et al., 2018), thereby reducing the internalised conflict. Consequently, the HRPs' decisions are not deliberately unethical but rather predicated by the competing demands inherent to their role.

Human resource professionals must manage divergent expectations from multiple stakeholders, which contributes to the manifestation of toxic leadership. The inherent dichotomy of the HR role creates internal conflict compelling the HRP to engage in toxic HR practices to eliminate or neutralise the tension. Accordingly, the role tension creates personal and professional challenges for the HRP. Being aware of their subordinate status and the power differential to challenge executive decisions, the HRP would ingratiate themselves with the organisational leaders, because the legitimacy of the HR function is influenced by the leaders' perceptions of HR (Heizmann & Fox, 2017). The HRP would endeavour to uphold the obligations of the strategic business partner role, which prioritises the organisation's financial goals above any social goals, reinforcing the stance that business goals should be achieved at all costs. Consequently, the HRP would choose to remain silent or rationalise and

overlook certain management actions that are deemed necessary to achieve the organisation's objectives despite the negative impact to the employees. This behaviour promotes a follower approach and emphasises the morally mute behaviour of the HRP (Csillag, 2019), which deviates from the requirements to role model ethical behaviour and enforce ethical values in the organisation.

### Limitations and recommendations

The study's sample size was very small, and this would influence the generalisability of the results. Although the findings were triangulated with data collected outside of the organisation, the findings are restricted to the selected organisation. The participants may have been reticent in sharing their experiences as the research question suggests that they could be involved in creating toxic environments. The participants may have withheld some critical experiences for the fear of being shamed for participating in collusive acts (Webster et al., 2016). The researcher attempted to mitigate this by building rapport prior to the interviews and engaging the participants on issues of confidentiality and anonymity of responses. Nonetheless, their candour cannot be guaranteed. The perspectives of organisational leaders who work with HRPs and engage in HR activities themselves were not included in this study. These perspectives would have likely influenced the data findings and perhaps offered a different layer of interpretation to the results.

Future studies should investigate the perspectives of line managers and organisational leaders who apply HR practices and understand how they perceive themselves and the HRP contributing to toxic leadership outcomes. The HRP's propensity to exercise power differs between organisations, and this should warrant further investigation to determine the extent of HR powers and how it can inflate or detract from toxic leadership practices.

Suggestions are offered to address the gaps in HR practices encountered by the HRP. The HRP's right to exercise legitimate power should be re-examined and amended so that they are empowered to make decisions without it being nullified by management. This will strengthen the legitimacy of the HR business partner role and facilitate effective judgement by the HRP to challenge the leaders (Harrington et al., 2015). The HR team should review the decision logic of their actions, especially in circumstances, which deviated from the prescribed practice. This will encourage HRPs to be more critical of their decisions in the future and mitigate any weak controls in their practices. It will also reduce the threat of leaders, who may have a propensity to manipulate circumstances for personal gain and to monitor the frequency of these. Furthermore, a risk register can be maintained of all the instances when the HRP intentionally deviated from prescribed HR practices and the team can reflect on the distinctive nature of the

circumstances that led to the decision. These mechanisms can instil a community of practice where HRPs are encouraged to review the moral aspects of their decisions and reach consensus on potentially toxic HR practices that should be eliminated.

### Significance of the study

Research on the role of HRPs in toxic leadership has primarily been examined from the perspective of workplace bullying (Catley et al., 2017; Mokgolo & Barnard, 2019). This study contributes to the phenomenon of toxic leadership and offers a nuanced understanding of how the paradoxical role of HRPs and their practices are likely to contribute to toxic leadership. It also contributes to the extant literature on dark behaviours among toxic leaders and their influence on the practices of HRPs.

### Conclusion

The HRP is responsible for creating and driving an appropriate leadership culture in the organisation. It is assumed that HRPs will hold themselves to a higher standard and be able to recognise their role in condoning or supporting toxic leadership before it severely impacts on business performance. This study highlights the dichotomous nature of the HR role and its influence on toxic leadership resulting in the HRP adopting a follower role to neutralise any intra-role conflict.

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#### Competing interests

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#### Authors' contributions

T.P. wrote this manuscript based on her master's dissertation, which was completed at the Da Vinci Institute for Technology Management, Modderfontein, South Africa. J.M. was T.P.'s supervisor and assisted in the editing of the manuscript for publication.

#### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Da Vinci Institute Ethics Committee (no. 003120).

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#### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, T.P.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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