

Exploring the Impact of Toxic Workplace Leadership on Job Retention: the Moderating Role of Employee Engagement in Tanzania's Public Universities

Juma .H. Uledi

The Open University of Tanzania

Department of Entrepreneurship and Marketing

ORCID iD: 0009-0005-6085-0861

jumahassan050@gmail.com

Abstract

The study investigated the impact of toxic workplace leadership on job retention, and the moderating role of employee engagement in Tanzanian public universities. The study was guided by toxic leadership theory and social exchange theory. It used the explanatory research design, and collected data through qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion of 175 respondents from Mzumbe University and Sokoine University of Agriculture. The findings of the study revealed that toxic leadership is a driving factor for dissatisfaction, disagreement, and turnover intention in the workplace.

In addition, the study found that employee engagement plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of toxic leadership. When employees are engaged, feel valued, and are connected to the mission of the universities, they are more committed and resilient, and remained committed despite negative leadership experiences. The study recommends that public universities in Tanzania should focus on training programmes aimed at promoting ethical, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent leadership.

Based on these findings, the study also proposes that public universities in Tanzania must implement development leadership programmes focused on ethical inclusive and emotional intelligence leadership. Furthermore, promoting positive leadership practices can help to create a supportive work culture that enhances staff retention and organisational effectiveness. According to the report, incorporating employee involvement into organisational growth is crucial for creating resilient organisations that can survive leadership upheavals and promote long-term success.

Keywords: Toxic workplace leadership; Job retention; Tanzanian public universities; Employee engagement; Turnover intention

1. Introduction

Toxic workplace leadership is a significant issue for businesses worldwide (Saleem et al., 2020). The success of any project is directly or indirectly dependent on a positive workplace environment, which is conducive to employees, and on the support that firms provide to their workers (Wang et al., 2020). All companies seek to determine the most effective ways to operate and grow to achieve long-term success and employees are the primary determinant of whether a company's objectives are met within predefined targets (Tanuwijaya, 2022).

In today's organisational landscape, toxic workplace culture poses a serious problem due to the detrimental behaviours often associated with it (Al-Hassani, 2025). Toxic workplace leadership refers to the harsh and frequently abusive treatment of employees, which endangers their health and safety (Rasool et al., 2021). Such behaviours may manifest in various forms, including rudeness, impolite communication, belittling co-workers, spreading rumours, or engaging in other actions that deviate from the norms of respectful and professional conduct (Bijalwan et al., 2024). Furthermore, in Jantjies and Botha (2024), toxic leaderships linked to higher staff turnover rates, which could cause an organisation to become unstable, and result in losses in hiring, training, and productivity. All these challenges can be eradicated if leaders communicate clearly, set clear goals, and are able to encourage and motivate their staff to produce their best work (Alrayssi, 2025).

1.1 Background

Toxic leadership is a leadership style that negatively affects organisations and demotivates employees (Ashfaq et al., 2023). Unlike abusive and destructive leaders who have a strong desire to cause harm and further harmful objectives, toxic leaders frequently have self-directed intentions, largely to hide their ineptitude and hold onto their position (Labrague, 2024). This form of leadership often results in negative and harmful experiences for employees, adversely impacting both their mental and physical well-being. Despite the evident consequences of such an environment, only a small number of employees formally report these issues, often due to personal or professional constraints (Iqbal et al., 2024). Toxic leadership significantly threatens employee well-being, workplace satisfaction, and retention (Hurd, 2025), and even though toxic leaders may possess high levels of skill and achieve success in their roles, they often foster an unhealthy environment among colleagues and subordinates. The effects of their behaviour typically extend beyond a few individuals (Wolor et al., 2022). Employee engagement, employee retention, job happiness, and organisational performance can be achieved by fostering an atmosphere where workers feel valued, respected, and safe. Workers are more involved in their work if the workplace atmosphere encourages individuals to be their authentic selves (Agbodjah, 2025).

Employee engagement is the degree of zeal, commitment, and emotional involvement that workers put into their jobs (Primayani et al., 2025). In addition, employee engagement is associated with job duties, which involve perseverance, intense engagement, and deepening in work activities, and also contributes to employee participation (Riyanto et al., 2021). This concept is very useful in eradicating various bad behaviours; as a constructive strategy, it prevents employee burnout and disengagement, channels their feelings into optimism, and encourages moral behaviour at work (Rasool et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is a more widespread and enduring affective-cognitive state, as opposed to a transient and particular one that is not centred on any specific thing, occasion, person, or action (Carmen et al., 2021). The moderating role of employee engagement emerged as a critical mechanism in shaping how toxic leadership influences job retention. The qualitative evidence shows that engagement operates as a psychological buffer, altering both the intensity and direction of employees' reactions to toxic leadership. Employees who reported higher engagement are characterised by a strong emotional connection to their work, alignment with institutional goals, and a sense of being valued. In contrast, employees with low engagement experienced toxic leadership more acutely.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Globally, recent studies have highlighted the widespread impact of toxic workplace environments. For example, in China, Rasool et al. (2021) examined how toxic workplace environments negatively affect employee engagement, both directly and indirectly, through organisational support and employee well-being. Similarly, in Indonesia, Hattab et al. (2022) found that destructive leadership results in counterproductive work behaviour. Another study investigated the effects of toxic workplace

environments and stress on the success of renewable energy projects in Pakistan (Wang et al., 2021), and in the United States of America, Agbodjah(2025) examined the moderating effect of organisational culture on the relationship between job satisfaction, employee engagement, and employee turnover engagement. The results of the study show that turnover intention was substantially impacted negatively by work dissatisfaction. In Pakistan, Naeem & Khurram (2020) examined the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention, focusing on the mediating role of psychological well-being and employee engagement.

In Africa, Jantjies and Botha (2024) observed the impact of toxic leadership on employees' intentions to leave a South African clinical research organisation, emphasising the importance of the mediating role of organisational culture. Furthermore, Dahlan et al. (2024) explored the multifaceted impact of toxic leadership on employee engagement, loyalty, satisfaction, and performance within higher education settings in Saudi Arabia. Higher staff turnover rates were linked to toxic leadership, which could cause organisations to become unstable and result in greater losses related to hiring, training, and production. Mwingirwa et al. (2024) examined the effects of career opportunities on employee engagement in fair-trade horticultural firms in Kenya. The results showed that career development significantly and favourably impacts employee engagement in Kenyan fair-trade horticultural companies. In South Africa, Amutenya (2019) examined the relationship between toxic leadership, employee engagement, and the intention to leave, while Shafie (2025) explored the consequences of toxic leadership in the business sector, focusing on an empirical study in Saudi Arabia.

In Tanzania, retaining academic staff in higher education institutions is essential in maintaining high-quality instruction and research (Mather, 2025), but toxic leadership can pose significant harm to both individuals and institutions. In an academic context, it negatively affects teaching, learning, and the overall operation of educational establishments. Baloyi (2020) and Tarimo(2021) examined the impact of the work environment on job satisfaction and employee turnover intention in Tanzania. According to the research findings, the impact of the moderating role of public service motivation (PSM) exhibits favourable effects on job satisfaction and turnover intention, whereas in negative or toxic work environments, there is a strong correlation between job dissatisfaction and turnover intention. Mwakibete(2023) examines the effectiveness of retention strategies in inhibiting labour turnover rate for information technology professionals in Tanzania, as in the case study on TANESCO headquarters.

Perhaps these studies offer valuable insights into motivation and retention strategies across sectors. Fragmented insights have focused on how toxic workplace leadership affects job retention in public universities in the Tanzanian context, particularly with the moderating role of employee engagement. Current research seeks to fill the gap by exploring the influence of toxic workplace leadership on job retention among academic staff in Tanzania's public universities through providing new insights into how employee engagement can buffer or amplify these effects.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study offers new perspectives to the existing body of knowledge by examining toxic workplace leadership and job retention within the under-researched context of Tanzania's public universities. While previous studies have explored toxic leadership in health sectors, corporate organisations, and global academic settings, limited empirical evidence exists on how leadership shapes job retention in Tanzania's higher learning institutions. The present study contributes by integrating toxic leadership theory with social exchange theory to explain how negative influences affect employee decisions to remain in or leave their institutions.

Additionally, the study provides a novel empirical contribution by investigating the moderating role of employee engagement as an aspect that has not been adequately addressed in prior research. By demonstrating how engagement can buffer or intensify the effects of toxic leadership, the study adds fresh insights into retention dynamics, and offers practical implications for leadership development and human resource practices in public universities. Therefore, this study aims to address a gap in the literature by exploring the relationship between toxic leadership and employee engagement in Tanzanian public universities. In addition, it explores the limited understanding of the mechanisms through which employee engagement moderates this relationship and influences job retention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Toxic Workplace Leadership

Toxic workplace leadership refers to a pattern of actions and behaviours in which leaders prioritise their own personal goals and interests over those of their team members and the organisation as a whole. This type of leadership is not only detrimental to employee well-being, but it also undermines organisational effectiveness (Ardiansyah, 2022). Toxic leaders often exhibit administrative tendencies that focus on self-promotion, disregard for employees' needs, disrespectful or authoritarian management styles, unethical behaviour, and a general animosity towards others (Abbas, 2020). Such leadership behaviours can create a harmful work environment, leading to increased employee disengagement, reduced job satisfaction, and, ultimately, lower job retention. In organisational contexts like Tanzanian public universities, where hierarchical structures and scarce resources may intensify the effects of toxic leadership, affecting employee retention and overall organisational performance, the detrimental effects of toxic leadership are especially pertinent.

2.2 Job Retention

Job retention refers to the process of maintaining a stable and committed workforce, which is crucial for the long-term success and performance of an organisation (Khan, 2020). It involves strategies and practices that ensure employees remain with the organisation over time, contributing to its overall stability and productivity. Retention rates, which can vary across companies and industries, are often measured by the proportion of employees who stay with an organisation for a specified period. High job retention is typically associated with a positive work environment, effective leadership, and employee satisfaction. However, low job retention can be a major problem when there is toxic leadership in the workplace, as bad leadership practices can drive away people, ultimately affecting the performance and expansion of Tanzanian public universities.

2.3 Tanzanian Public Universities

The foundation of higher education is made up of public universities, which are often confused with state-owned establishments. Their beginnings in Tanzania date back to 1961, when the University College Dar es Salaam (UCD) was founded. Later renamed the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), this establishment served as an example of the early phases of public higher education (Mwita et al., 2023). The Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU), established under the Universities Act, Cap. 346, explained that in Tanzania there are 50 approved universities, with 19 public-owned and 31 private-owned. In this present study, therefore, the employees who work in these universities are the key stakeholders.

2.4 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is defined as a constructive, satisfying, work-related mental state that is marked by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Engagement is a more widespread and enduring affective-cognitive state as opposed to a transient and particular one that is not centred on any specific thing, occasion, person, or action. De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021). Furthermore, it is based on engaged workers remaining with companies longer, performing better, and suffering from burnout less frequently. Given the importance of engagement, Stein et al. (2021), developed employee engagement checklist. This proactive action is especially critical in today's evolving work environments, where uncertainty, digital transformation and leadership challenges require employers to maintain employee well-being and a commitment to maintain a high level of performance and retention.

2.5 Turnover intention

Turnover intention refers to the probability that a worker will quit their current position. (Belete, 2018). Furthermore, it is the rate at which employees join and depart the company. It refers to the average length of time that workers remain with the company. (Alam & Asim, 2019). In the same vein, turnover intention is associated with those who stay with the company is the ones who intend to leave. When it comes to the effect it has on the company's morale, losing good personnel is also expensive. Those who stay may frequently experience discouragement or demonization, which lowers output and job satisfaction. (Alkahtani, 2015).

2.6 Theories Underpinning the Study

This study is grounded in two key theories: Toxic Leadership Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. Toxic leadership theory gained traction in the early 2000s, but unlike some theories, it does not have a singular founder or a clear point of origin. However, several scholars have contributed to the development of this theory, including Jean Lipman-Blumen (2006) and Robert I. Sutton (2007). The theory explains that harsh and often abusive treatment of employees can negatively impact their health and safety (Rasool et al., 2021). Additionally, it can directly or indirectly reduce employee due to lack of key factors, such as organizational support and employee wellbeing (Hattabet et al., 2022). In the context of Tanzania's public universities, where there are hierarchical structures and limited funding, such toxic leadership may be particularly pronounced.

Social Exchange Theory, proposed by George Homans in the 1950s, focuses on the interactions between an actor and a target, emphasising reciprocal attitudes or behaviours and the resulting relationships (Ahmad et al., 2024). This theory suggests that workers are unlikely to remain with organisations where they perceive social interactions as unjust or harmful. It provides a framework for understanding how toxic leadership can undermine job retention. Furthermore, social exchange theory could possibly offer a unified foundation for a large portion of organisational behaviour (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Ali et al. (2024) presumes that the parties involved have an exchange relationship, are trustworthy, and that they work to fulfil their obligations to one another.

2.7 Empirical Review

Most earlier studies focused on, for instance, investigating the impact of toxic workplace leadership globally, and the impact of toxic workplace environments in China (Rasool et al., 2021). Another study explored the effects of toxic workplace environments and workplace stress on the success of renewable energy projects in Pakistan (Wang et al., 2021). In developing countries, Jantjies & Botha (2024)

observed the impact of toxic leadership on employees' intentions to leave a South African clinical research organisation, highlighting how organisational culture mediates this relationship. Dahlan et al. (2024) investigated the multifaceted impact of toxic leadership on employee engagement, loyalty, satisfaction, and performance in higher educational settings in Saudi Arabia.

Tarimo (2021), explored the impact of the work environment on job satisfaction and employee turnover intention in Tanzania. Another study by Jantjies & Botha (2024), explored toxic leadership on employee turnover intention in clinical research organisations. Furthermore, another antecedent. Mwita et al., (2023) investigated the impact of organisational culture on turnover intentions among lecturers in Tanzanian public universities. However, in the Tanzanian context, the impact of toxic workplace leadership on job retention is largely unknown.

The majority of these studies have been conducted in countries outside of Africa, and specifically in the private sector or in specialised industries such as clinical research or renewable energy, leaving a notable gap in higher education settings. Additionally, many of these studies did not sufficiently consider the moderating role of employee engagement in the relationship between toxic workplace leadership and job retention, particularly in the Tanzanian context within public universities. Similarly, a number of research gaps have still not been sufficiently explored, nor how employee engagement facilitates reducing or eradicating toxic workplace leadership, which this present study addresses.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research design

This study adopted an explanatory qualitative research design, which is suitable for examining complex and sensitive phenomena such as toxic workplace employee engagement and job retention. An exploratory design allows researchers to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and behaviours of academic staff within their institutional settings. The issue of toxic leadership has been conducted within Tanzanian public universities, necessitating an open and flexible approach that allows themes to emerge naturally from participants' narratives.

3.2 Sampling procedures and sampling justifications

A total of 175 participants were included in the study, drawn from Mzumbe University and Sokoine University of Agriculture. The study employs purposive sampling, targeting academic and administrative staff that had direct experience working under different leadership styles. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it prioritises the depth and relevance of information rather than statutory representatives. The sample size was informed by the principle of data saturation, where no new insights emerge. Despite additional interviews in qualitative research, saturation is typically reached with 20 to 30 interviews per institution; however, given the complexity of leadership issues and the diversity of academic roles, a larger sample helped capture wider perspectives. Thus 175 respondents were sufficient to archive saturation across both institutions.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interviews allowed participants to share personal experience, while reflection and interaction of FGDs helped uncover shared patterns of behaviour and perceptions. Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted in confidential settings.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability and validity of the qualitative findings, the study recognised trustworthiness strategies as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources using both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to confirm the constituency of emerging themes. Member checking was conducted by sharing summary transcripts with selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail documenting research decisions, coding processes, and changes made throughout the analysis. To promote conformability, the study used reflective notes to minimise biases. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and data collection procedures, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar settings.

3.5 Data analysis process

After verbatim transcription and familiarisation, the transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Open codes were generated and recorded in a code book, and codes were iteratively grouped into categories and themes, which were reviewed against the dataset and refined. In addition, independent coding, where multiple researchers (coders) individually apply a set of codes or themes to the same data (a subset of a transcript), and disagreements were resolved through consensus, member checking, triangulations across interviews, focus group discussions, and negative case analysis to validate interpretations. An audit trail of coding decisions, memos, and codebooks were maintained.

4. Results and Discussions

The findings strongly align with toxic leadership theory, which posits that abusive, authoritarian, and self-serving leadership behaviours create a harmful work climate that undermines employee well-being and commitment. Respondents' descriptions of top-down decision-making, intimidation, and lack of emotional support reflect the core competencies of leadership. In addition, the findings support social exchange theory by showing that when employees perceive an imbalance in their social and professional exchanges, and continuous negative exchanges such as disrespect, lack of support, or unfair treatment, they reciprocate through reduced commitment and withdrawal behaviour. This study demonstrates how toxic leadership disrupts the exchange relationship, reducing employees' willingness to remain in their institutions. The measured variables of the study are given below.

4.1 A toxic workplace leadership

The findings of the study revealed that toxic workplace leadership is one of the factors that necessitated a high percentage of employees receiving off-the-job training, due to unfriendly workplace leadership, which includes culture and other factors. This factor was revealed after interviewing some of the respondents, who provided their opinion. For example, in the interview, one of the respondents stated that:

“My current supervisor has a very top-down authoritarian leadership style. He rarely consults before making a decision, and when he gives an instruction, there is a little room for discussion or feedback. He expects us to follow orders strictly, even they don't make sense” (Respondent 1).

Furthermore, Iqbal et al. (2022) explored that toxic workplace leadership is associated with unwanted traits such as conceit, deceit, and authoritarianism, all hallmarks of autocratic leadership. Ahmed et al. (2024) insisted that harmful, abusive, toxic leadership can also raise stress levels, lower organisational

performance, induce emotional weariness in staff members, and lower morale. This revealed that toxic workplace leadership is a barrier to employees in the public sector not performing their duties effectively.

4.2 Job Retention

In this question, the respondents were required to provide their views on their understanding of the concept of job retention, and which factors contribute to employees staying in an organisation. In addition, the respondents were required to provide suggestions on how leadership practice can enhance job retention. For instance, one key informant said: *“From my experience, working in public university where leaders are disrespectful, or make decision without involving a team, it becomes very demoralising; you start feeling that your work doesn’t matter”* (Respondent 2).

“Personally, there have been moments when I thought about leaving, not because I hate the job, but because the environment feels toxic and draining. It’s hard to stay engaged when you feel unsupported and unappreciated. Even if the pay and benefits are okay, mental peace is so important” (Respondent 3).

These findings are similar to the studies by Reyhanoglu et al. (2022) and Hattab et al. (2022), which show that while all aspects of organisational silence and the will to leave are strongly connected, toxic leadership is directly and negatively correlated with organisational justice. This suggests that toxic leadership in the workplace negatively impacts job retention because huge numbers of employees may leave their jobs. These factors, such as no support from supervisors and other miserable workplace cultures, are often found in the public sector.

4.3 Employee Engagement

The findings indicate that employee engagement is crucial in the eradication of toxic leadership, because when employees are engaged, feel valued, and are connected to the mission of the university and their colleagues, they are more committed and resilient, and remain committed, regardless of the kind of leadership. This is revealed through a respondent’s interview:

“In my experience, employee engagement really shapes how you respond to toxic leadership. When I feel engaged, meaning I’m connected to my work, my team, and I believe in the mission of the university, I’m more likely to push through the challenges, even if the leadership is toxic” (Human Resources Officer).

This suggests that employee engagement in Tanzanian public universities, such as Mzumbe University and Sokoine University, has the potential to foster a collaborative atmosphere between leaders and employees, and create a good atmosphere in the workplace, even if there is toxic workplace leadership. Another key informant states that:

“But when I’m not engaged, toxic leadership hits harder. It’s like nothing keep me there. I become more emotionally detached less motivated, and I stop going the extra mile” (Respondent 5).

A key issue that Tanzanian public universities must ensure is that there is employee engagement, because although toxic leadership is common in various public universities, employee engagement can act as a cornerstone in retaining talented employees. These findings are consistent with other findings by Soomoro et al. (2024) and Acuna, et al. (2024), which show the positive impact of employee engagement on the eradication of toxic leadership. This factor is crucial in the eradication of toxic workplace leadership in public sectors, such as public universities and other organisations.

5. Ethical Considerations

Mzumbe University and Sokoine University of Agriculture were consulted for ethical approval in order to ensure that the proper standards were followed. The head of department, director of Human Resources, heads of units, and other students were involved in the study and provided their opinions willingly, and were assured of confidentiality and privacy. All participants were informed of the purpose and the nature of the study, and the participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data collected was handled with the highest level of integrity and used solely for academic purposes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study contributes to leadership and organisational behaviour theories by demonstrating how toxic leadership disrupts a social exchange relationship, thereby undermining job retention. Theoretically, the study highlights the importance of integrating toxic leadership theory with social exchange theory to understand how destructive leadership behaviours influence employees' attachment to their institutions. In practical terms, public universities should prioritise leadership development programmes centred on ethical conduct, emotional intelligence, and inclusivity in decision-making. Institutions must also strengthen engagement initiatives such as participatory governance, a recognition system, and professional development to enhance resilience against negative leadership climates.

Future research should examine toxic leadership using mixed methods or longitudinal designs to assess how leadership behaviours evolve overtime. Researchers may also explore the role of organisational culture, psychological safety, or institutional policies as additional moderators or mediators.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

I declare that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study. All interactions with participants were conducted in a professional and unbiased manner. The involvement of institutional staff and students did not influence the objectivity of data collection or analysis. Any risks of bias were minimised through the transparent procedures and adherence to research guidelines. Furthermore, no financial, personal, or professional affiliations exist that could be perceived to have influenced the outcomes or integrity of this research.

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