

The Effect of Toxic Leadership on Employee Motivation: The Mediating Role of Burnout Syndrome

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ABSTRACT

Employee motivation, job satisfaction, and retention have become crucial issues that manufacturing companies must deal with in order to achieve sustainable performance in today's fiercely competitive and demanding organizational environment. Employee attitudes and psychological health are significantly influenced by leadership. However, toxic leadership behaviours, which have increasingly been associated with adverse employee outcomes, especially burnout, may undermine the effectiveness of an organization. Despite the growth in attention to the concept of toxic leadership, empirical evidence on its indirect effects on key employee outcomes through burnout remains very limited, especially in the Malaysian manufacturing context. The present study investigates how toxic leadership influences employees' motivational level, job satisfaction, and employee retention with burnout syndrome as the mediating variable. A quantitative research design was adopted for which data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 122 employees at Honda Damansara. A simple random sampling technique was employed and the proposed relationships were tested using statistical methods. The results showed that toxic leadership was significantly and positively related to burnout and negatively related to motivation, job satisfaction, and retention among employees. In addition, burnout significantly mediated the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation. These findings highlight the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on employees' psychological well-being and work-related attitudes. By offering empirical evidence on the mediating role of burnout, this study adds to the body of literature already in existence. It also has practical implications for organizations looking to improve employee motivation, satisfaction, and retention through the development of healthier leadership practices.

Keywords- Toxic Leadership, Burnout Syndrome, Employee Motivation, Manufacturing Industry

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's manufacturing industry is always up against the challenges of a shifting economy, new technology, and heightened competition. Employee motivation, job satisfaction, and retention become critical to maintaining productivity and organizational resilience. Motivation is essential for finishing tasks, but it also has a significant impact on long-term engagement, creativity, and commitment. In a similar vein, reports indicate that as of 2024, up to 67% of workers exhibit burnout symptoms, necessitating successful organizational interventions to guarantee workers' performance and well-being.

Leadership is a core social influence that shapes employee experiences and outcomes in organizations. Toxic leadership, as manifested in abusive supervision, emotional aggression, and lack of empathy, has now become a significant destroyer of employee psychological health and motivational capacities. Such destructive leadership practices are associated with emotional exhaustion, increased stress, disengagement, and higher turnover intentions. Recent conceptual reviews have emphasized burnout as a key mechanism through which toxic leadership undermines organizational performance and employee motivation.

Workers at high-stress companies, like Honda Damansara, often report ongoing burnout symptoms that drastically lower intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Although research has been done on toxic leadership, burnout, and motivation separately, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the mediating role of burnout in the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation, especially within the context of Malaysian multinational companies. The above research gap is important because toxic leading behaviors violate the three core psychological needs: those of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which reduce motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The current study, therefore, seeks to explore the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation with a mediating effect of burnout syndrome among employees in Honda Damansara. It contributes to the theoretical literature on leadership and occupational health but has practical relevance for organizational leaders, human resource practitioners, and policymakers since it will help design appropriate interventions that decrease burnout, enhance motivation, and enhance job satisfaction and retention levels.

Problem Statement

Honda Damansara, which is one of the largest car-manufacturing facilities in Malaysia, is currently facing many challenges related to the motivation of its employees even though it has been meeting its target requirements. Motivations are very important for improving productivity and overall resilience in the organization and have been declining over the last years (Ahmed et al., 2024; Bakker & Demerouti, 2024). The information gathered from internal audits and employee inputs from 2022-2023 indicates that poor morales, lack of career growth, and lack of associations with the management have contributed greatly to poor motivation.

This is closely associated with toxic leadership styles, such as authoritarianism, manipulation, emotional aggression, and a lack of empathy (Schmidt, 2025; Pelletier, 2024). An analysis of departments within Honda Damansara reveals that leadership styles such as micromanaging, emotional aggression, and unstable leadership have contributed to a demotivating and unhealthy work environment. This is further supported by findings from Randstad Malaysia (2022), where 36% of workers in the manufacturing sector feel that leadership is behind their dissatisfaction, and JobStreet Malaysia (2021), where 70% of workers feel that they have considered resigning because of unhealthy work environments, during a period that saw an 18% increase in turnover at Honda Damansara.

Toxic leadership is also a factor in burnout syndrome. This refers to feelings of emotional depletion, detachment, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. This occurs according to Maslach & Leiter (2025) and supported by Ahmed et al. (2024). Workers in pressure-filled production settings like Honda Damansara often find themselves experiencing burnout. This refers to more than fifty percent reporting feelings of burnout in the 2023 HR climate survey. This reduces a person's resilience against psychological challenges. The condition is also accompanied by issues like turnover intentions. This is according to the views found within the 2024 literature by Schaufeli & Bakker. It is also supported by Demerouti et al. (2024).

Even though there has been research conducted on toxic leadership and burnout, there is little evidence that looks into the relationship between burnout and motivation as a result of toxic leadership in multinational manufacturing organizations in Malaysia (Mdhlalose, 2025; BMC Nursing, 2025). According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy, competence, and feelings of relatedness are facilitated by motivation, but rather because toxic leadership interferes with and burnout further detracts from motivational behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2021).

Therefore, this study seeks to establish the extent to which toxic leadership affects employee motivation and how the syndrome of burnout mediates such relationships at Honda Damansara. Understanding these interactions is very important for the development of effective strategies aimed at enhancing leadership practice, preventing burnout, and preserving workforce motivation.

By addressing this gap, the study contributes both theoretical and practical insights into employee well-being in high-performance industries. It was also expected that the findings would inform improvements in the leadership of Malaysian MNCs; burning issues; and motivation, while nurturing academic knowledge of the links between

toxic leadership and motivation with burnout, based on Ronnie (2024) and Dwita et al. (2025).

Research Objectives

As a result, the purpose of this study is threefold, and the research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To study the direct effect of toxic leadership on employee motivation.
2. To examine the direct effect of toxic leadership on burnout syndrome.
3. To investigate the direct effect of toxic leadership on burnout syndrome on employee motivation.
4. To study burnout syndrome as a mediating factor that indirectly affects the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation.

Research Questions

The questions of the research are as follows:

1. What is the direct effect of toxic leadership on employee motivation?
2. What is the direct effect of toxic leadership on burnout syndrome?
3. What is the direct effect of burnout syndrome on employee motivation?
4. How does burnout syndrome as a mediating factor indirectly affect the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation?

Scope of Study

The study's goals are to examine the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation, with burnout syndrome as a mediating variable. The study is conducted within the automotive industry, specifically at Honda Damansara, a branch of Multinational Corporation (MNC) in Malaysia. The questionnaires are distributed to all staff members across various departments who are directly involved in day-to-day operations and exposed to workplace leadership behaviours. The research scope focuses on employee motivation as the dependent variable, toxic leadership as the independent variable, and burnout syndrome as the mediating variable.

Limitations/ Study Constraints

This study contains four major limitations. First, the data is derived from employee self-reports, which might not accurately reflect real leadership practices or workplace dynamics at Honda Damansara. Next, the findings may not be as applicable to other industries or regions with different organizational and cultural contexts because all participants in the Malaysian Multinational Companies (MNC) context have an Asian cultural background. Besides, because there aren't many empirical studies on toxic leadership and burnout conducted locally, this research mainly draws from international frameworks and literature, which might not accurately represent local realities. Finally, the study only provides a partial understanding of the phenomenon by concentrating on particular leadership behaviors and motivational outcomes. As a result, individual differences and broader organizational variables are not thoroughly examined. Different response formats were adopted from the original instruments. Future studies are encouraged to employ a standardized response scale across all constructs to improve measurement consistency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Underpinning Theory

Researcher Gregor (2002) reported that underpinning theories are "theories for comprehending social context studies that underpin a study are typically considered as a lens" (Orlikowski, 2000). These theories help explain

“how” and “why” particular phenomena occur within a given context. This allows a researcher to effectively link the study’s variables with the overall research framework for clearer interpretation. Theory shall systematically explain the relationship among study variables or phenomena to explain, predict, and control such phenomena (Mkhomazi & Iyamu, 2017). For this research, which focuses on Honda Damansara employees, the selected theories aim to enhance our understanding of how toxic leadership practices contribute to burnout and, in turn, how burnout mediates employee motivation. These theories do not determine the study’s outcome but serve to guide the analysis and interpretation of findings. Hence, the following sub sections will demonstrate the theory relevant to toxic leadership, employee motivation, and burnout in the context of Malaysian MNCs.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a humanistic psychological lens to understanding employee motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), motivation ranges from amotivation to intrinsic motivation, with the most effective and long-lasting motivation arising when people's basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are satisfied. All three of these needs are inherently violated by toxic leadership. Self-determined motivation is less likely to be experienced by Honda Damansara employees who report feeling micromanaged (lack of autonomy), unrecognized (lack of competence), or cut off from communication (lack of relatedness). Employees move from intrinsic engagement to external compliance, or worse, disengagement and turnover, when these needs are not met (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

SDT is essential to this study’s conceptual framework as it allows for an in-depth analysis of why and how motivation declines under toxic leadership, particularly when burnout acts as a psychological intermediary. As such, SDT serves as the primary theoretical underpinning for this research, linking the psychological impact of toxic leadership to the resulting decline in motivation through the mediating effect of burnout. In summary, the integration of Self-Determination Theory provides a solid foundation for understanding how toxic leadership erodes employee motivation through the mediating effect of burnout. This theoretical grounding informs the development of the study’s conceptual framework, which will be presented in the following section.

Employee Motivation

Motivation plays a critical role in shaping individual attitudes, behaviours, and performance in the workplace. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), motivation refers to the process that initiates, directs, and sustains goal-oriented behaviour. They emphasise that motivation varies not only in amount but also in type, primarily categorised into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This distinction is particularly important in organisational contexts, where employees may be driven by internal fulfilment or external rewards depending on the nature of their work and environment.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000) remains one of the most prominent frameworks for understanding motivation. Intrinsic motivation arises when individuals engage in tasks out of genuine interest or personal satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation involves actions driven by external rewards or pressures. In challenging work environments such as those characterised by toxic leadership, both forms of motivation are vulnerable to disruption, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion, reduced engagement, and turnover (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has become increasingly relevant in discussions about employee well-being and retention in high-pressure settings. Recent research highlights how positive organisational climates enhance intrinsic motivation, while controlling or abusive environments tend to suppress it (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Knispel, 2017). In contrast, reliance on extrinsic motivators such as bonuses or disciplinary action may produce short-term compliance but not long-term commitment, especially under toxic leadership conditions (Ben-Hur & Kinley, 2016). As a result, understanding both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of motivation is essential for sustaining employee well-being and engagement, especially within high-pressure work settings.

Other than self-determination theory, according to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), excessive job demands combined with inadequate job resources contribute to employee

burnout. Toxic leadership may be conceptualized as a job demand because it increases psychological strain and emotional exhaustion. Consequently, employees experience burnout, which negatively influences motivation. Therefore, the JD-R model provides an appropriate theoretical explanation for the mediating role of burnout in this study.

Table 1 shows summarizing key definitions of employee motivation from various sources. These definitions serve as a foundational basis for understanding the motivational constructs in this study.

Table 1. Definition of Employee Motivation

Author	Definition
Ryan & Deci (2000)	Motivation is a process that initiates, directs, and sustains goal-oriented behaviour. It consists of intrinsic and extrinsic components.
Deci & Ryan (2008)	Intrinsic motivation enhances autonomy and engagement, while extrinsic motivation varies in quality depending on the internalisation of external goals.
Amabile (2001)	Motivation, particularly intrinsic, is central to creativity and sustained commitment in professional settings.
Gagne & Deci (2005)	Organisational environments that support autonomy and competence foster higher intrinsic motivation among employees.
Santos- Longhurst (2019)	Extrinsic motivation includes rewards, recognition, or avoidance of punishment; intrinsic motivation arises from satisfaction and self-driven goals.
Ben-Hur & Kinley (2016)	Motivation is sustained when organisations align meaningful goals with employee values, particularly in leadership-driven cultures.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, not because of external pressures or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In organisational settings, this form of motivation is strongly linked to job satisfaction, creativity, and commitment (Amabile, 2001). Intrinsically motivated employees are more likely to persist through challenges and engage deeply in their work, even without material rewards. According to White, intrinsic motivation is the fulfillment that results from a person's internal needs when interacting with their surroundings, including their workplace. Intrinsic motivation, according to several academics (Amabile, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 2000), is the interest and pleasure people derive from their work. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), intrinsic motivation flourishes when individuals feel autonomous, competent, and connected to others. In toxic workplaces, however, where autonomy is stifled and psychological safety is compromised, intrinsic motivation can diminish. This can lead to disengagement and burnout, especially when employees no longer find joy or meaning in their tasks (Bakker et al., 2021). All things considered, this work fosters a feeling of fulfillment, autonomy, and purpose (Santos Longhurst, 2019). A person experiences self-fulfillment after finishing a task related to their job. Examples include accepting more responsibility at work or volunteering for harder jobs. The reason why followers stick with an organization can be greatly influenced by this internal self-motivation.

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic rewards or awards are described by Ryan and Deci (2000) as an outside incentive that a person receives upon finishing a specific task. At first, it was believed that this kind of motivation came from someone or something pushing someone else. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), some people resist extrinsic motivation because they perceive it as unpleasant and uncontrollable. But after more research, extrinsic motivation finally gave way to a decision that a person "self-endorsed" (p.55). In other words, a person first decides to do something

that will result in a reward or award; then, the person sees the reward or award as an internal objective or something enjoyable. Job security, good pay, tactful discipline, and favorable working conditions are examples of extrinsic motivation, which is defined as external motivation that propels someone to act (Makki & Amid, 2017) (Kovach, 1995). Although they are all beyond the followers' control, they all play a big role in their decision to stick with their group. SpriggHR (2020) looks at what drives followers to act in ways that facilitate finishing tasks at work. This consulting firm suggests that followers be motivated by personal benefits and an individual's effectiveness. Extrinsic motivators were discovered to be either avoiding punishment or receiving external rewards. Money earned, anticipated praise, resume building, loyalty recognition, or being given instructions to fulfill a task are a few instances of external rewards. Employees frequently view extrinsic motivators as transactional or coercive rather than empowering in workplaces with toxic supervisors. According to Knispel (2017), when extrinsic motivation is associated with control or manipulation, workers may comply out of fear but lack true commitment, eventually resulting in disengagement and burnout.

Toxic Leadership

To provide clarity on the varied conceptualisations of toxic leadership, several definitions from past literature are summarised in Table 2 below. These definitions reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of toxic leadership, which typically manifests through manipulation, emotional abuse, self-centeredness, and exploitative managerial styles. Some scholars define toxic leadership by its observable behaviors, while others consider it a broader construct encompassing destructive interpersonal relationships and institutional dynamics. For instance, Schmidt (2008) described toxic leadership as a style marked by narcissism, authoritarianism, and abusive supervision. Meanwhile, Lipman Blumen (2005) emphasized the deceptive charisma of toxic leaders who manipulate others for personal gain. This broad spectrum of definitions underscores that toxic leadership is not limited to any one act but is a systematic pattern of harmful behaviors that compromise psychological safety and organizational functioning.

Table 2 Definition of Toxic Leadership

Author	Definition
Schimdt (2008)	Describes toxic leadership as a style marked by abusive supervision, narcissism, and self-serving behavior.
Lipman-Blumen (2005)	Toxic leaders are initially charismatic but later abuse power and manipulate followers for personal gain.
Celebi et al., (2015); Demir (2020)	Defines toxic leadership through behaviors such as manipulation, selfishness, and lack of appreciation.
Padilla et al. (2007)	Toxic leadership emerges from the interaction of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a toxic context.
Mehta & Maheswari (2014)	Toxic leaders prioritize personal agendas over organizational goals, often creating fear-based cultures.
Pelletier (2010)	Identified widespread verbal abuse, emotional harm, and morale deterioration under toxic leaders.
Honda Malaysia Internal Report (2024)	Internal HR feedback shows increasing burnout, turnover, and disengagement attributed to toxic leadership traits.

These definitions collectively demonstrate that toxic leadership is not limited to one specific behavior but rather comprises a combination of traits and contextual triggers that undermine organisational functioning, particularly relevant in high-pressure environments like Honda Damansara.

Toxic Leadership Scale

To measure the presence and intensity of toxic leadership behaviours in this study, the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) developed by Schmidt (2008) is adopted. The TLS consists of 30 items, measured using a 5-point Likert scale, and covers the five core dimensions of toxic leadership: abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion and unpredictability. Each dimension represents a unique aspect of destructive leadership that can influence employee outcomes. TLS has been widely validated in leadership and organizational psychology research, offering both reliability and multidimensional depth (Schmidt, 2008; Pelletier, 2010). Its usage enables researchers to differentiate between varying degrees and types of toxicity in leadership styles, especially in high-pressure sectors such as the automotive manufacturing industry. Table 2.5 below provides a summary of the five TLS dimensions and sample items used in this study.

Table 3 Dimensions and Sample Items from Toxic Leadership Scale

Dimensions	Definition	Sample Item
Abusive Supervision	Hostile verbal and emotional behaviours	“My supervisor ridicules me in front of others.”
Authoritarianism	Unilateral control and decision making	“My supervisor expects unquestioned obedience.”
Narcissism	Inflated sense of self- importance and arrogance	“My supervisor believes they are more important than others.”
Self-Promotion	Taking credit for the work and achievements of others	“My supervisor often highlights their own achievements”.
Unpredictability	Erratic and inconsistent behavior	“My supervisor behaves inconsistently from day to day”.

The scale's multidimensional approach allows researchers to identify which aspects of toxic leadership are most strongly associated with decreased employee motivation. Its use in this study enables a comprehensive empirical analysis of toxic leadership in the Malaysian manufacturing sector, particularly within Honda Damansara. This structured measurement ensures that the toxic leadership construct is operationalised, enabling accurate statistical evaluation alongside burnout and motivational outcomes. Despite its prevalence, toxic leadership remains underexplored in the Malaysian MNC context, especially in the automotive manufacturing sector. The lack of formal documentation or confrontation of toxic behaviors often results in underreporting, while organizational focus remains on productivity and market competitiveness. This research seeks to fill this empirical gap by examining how toxic leadership at Honda Damansara influences employee motivation, job satisfaction, and retention, and how burnout serves as a mediating variable.

Burnout Syndrome

TABLE 4 Definition of Burnout

Author	Definition
World Health Organization (2019)	World Health Organization (2019) defines burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Burnout is characterized by feeling of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy

Maslach & Leiter (2016)	A prolonged response to chronic job stressors, rooted in mismatches between people and work.
Anjum et al. (2018)	Burnout linked to pessimism, loss of creativity, and reduced ability to cope with job demands.
Honda Malaysia Internal Report (2024)	Internal HR feedback shows increasing burnout, turnover, and disengagement attributed to toxic leadership traits.

As shown in Table 4, burnout has been consistently associated with prolonged exposure to unmanaged stress and dysfunctional workplace dynamics, reinforcing its relevance in analyzing toxic leadership contexts like Honda Damansara. To better understand how burnout manifests in employees, it is essential to examine its key dimensions as identified in the literature.

Dimensions of Burnout

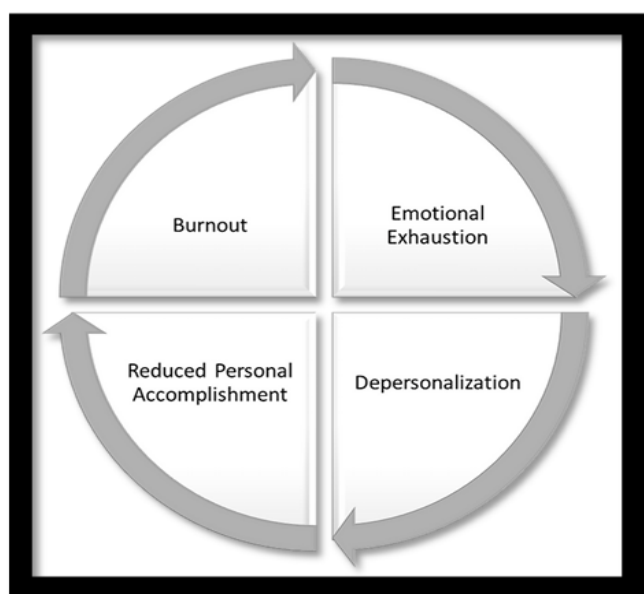


Fig. 1 Dimensions of Burnout (Maslach, 1982)

Table 5 Dimensions of Burnout

Author	Definition
Emotional Exhaustion	The feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources. It results in fatigue, irritability, and a lack of enthusiasm. Common relations include excessive workloads, lack of sleep, and toxic supervision (Gürbüz & Karapınar, 2018).
Depersonalization	The development of negative, cynical attitudes and feelings about one's clients or colleagues. This defensive mechanism associated with emotional distancing and decreases empathy (Maslach et al., 2001).
Reduced Personal Accomplishment	The tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly about one's work with clients. It is characterized by feelings of incompetence and lack of achievement (Ergin, 1992)

These three dimensions collectively form the diagnostic core of burnout and serve as indicators of employee well-being under toxic leadership environments.

Lack of Burnout Awareness

The experiences of people who are at risk for burnout are not well understood (Gauche et al., 2017). People's personal and professional lives are affected by corporate psychopaths at work, which contributes to burnout (Boddy & Taplin, 2016). These areas include demands on one's life, career, and health (Boddy & Taplin, 2016; Carrola et al., 2021). In manufacturing settings like Honda Damansara, the lack of burnout awareness is especially problematic, as high production demands and rigid management styles often normalize stress and emotional fatigue. According to Gauche et al. (2017), managers and professionals need to be more cognizant of these findings and assist staff members who have been identified as having a high risk of burnout. Symptoms such as recurring headaches, digestive issues, and mental fatigue were reported (Ahola et al., 2017). Employees were frequently uncreative, felt bad about their jobs, and lacked the energy to finish them (Budak & Erdal, 2022; Gauche et al., 2017).

Solutions for Burnout Syndrome

In toxic workplaces, addressing burnout calls for thoughtful and compassionate communication. According to research by Weger et al. (2014), methods such as sympathetic paraphrasing can ease tension at work. Particularly in high-stress settings like the automotive industry, paraphrasing can improve communication, ease interpersonal conflict, and support emotional regulation when done properly (Seehausen et al., 2012; Tucker & Hoying, 2023). Incorporating structured interventions can greatly lower burnout and increase workforce resilience, especially in high-demand settings like Honda Damansara. Regular well-being audits, supervisor coaching, and mindfulness training can all be used to identify early burnout symptoms and make sure preventative measures are taken.

Framework of Study

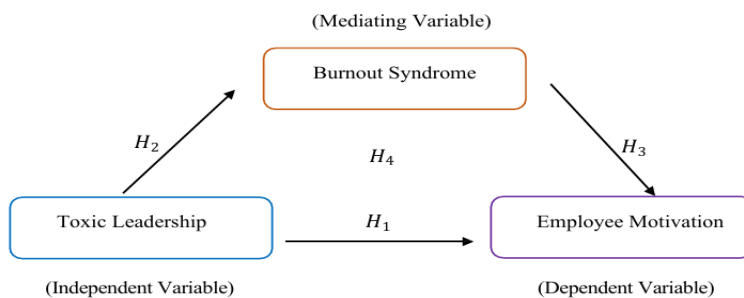


Fig. 2 Research Framework

The theoretical underpinnings and prior empirical data described in the sections above served as the basis for the conceptual framework used in this investigation. This model is developed to investigate the relationship between toxic leadership on employee motivation, with burnout serving as a mediating variable. As illustrated in Figure 2, toxic leadership is positioned as the independent variable, employee motivation as the dependent variable, and burnout as the mediating variable. The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship among experienced employees working in MNCs.

Empirical Research

Relationship between Toxic Leadership and Employee Motivation

Toxic leadership, such as abusive leadership, narcissistic leadership, and authoritarian leadership, has also been observed to negatively affect employee motivation (Ronen & Donia, 2020). Toxic leadership results in disengagement and poor performance instead of displaying supportive practices and resorting to leadership by control and manipulation (Semedo et al., 2022). When employees are working under stressful circumstances, toxic leadership decreases commitment and psychological safety and reduces intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Koç et al., 2022; Wolor et al., 2022). Therefore, the current study proposed that:

H1: There is a significant relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation.

Relationship between Toxic Leadership and Burnout Syndrome

Burnout could be considered the consequence or result of exposure to poor leadership, typified by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased feelings of individual accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Studies indicate that when employees are exposed to poor leadership, they experience burnout, reducing their well-being, work efficiency, and intent for turnover (Budak & Erdal, 2022; Nunes & Palma-Moreira, 2024). Burnout in high-pressure industries, such as automobile production, can be related by control and performance pressures (Morris, 2019; Waldiya, 2023). Thus, this study proposed that:

H2: There is a significant relationship between toxic leadership and burnout syndrome.

Relationship between Burnout Syndrome and Employee Motivation

The main disadvantage of burnout is that it demotivates employees by draining their psychological energies. Higher levels of burnout mean lower levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, disengagement, and under-performance at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Hakanen et al., 2008). In stressful production milieus, burned-out workforce members tend to have low initiative, low productivity, low tasks initiative, or low task performance (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Rich et al., 2010). Therefore, it can be concluded that:

H3: There is significant relationship between burnout syndrome and employee motivation

The Relationship between Toxic Leadership, Burnout Syndrome and Employee Motivation

The negative impact of toxic leadership in determining demotivated employees might be mediated by burnout as toxic leadership behaviors, such as micromanagement and emotional manipulation, contribute to depletion in psychological resources in employees, causing them to experience burnout and demotivation (Schaufeli and Baker, 2004; Al-Hassani, 2025). There is evidence that burnout leads to a lack of engagement and initiative, as well as ineffective job performance, causing demotivated workers in high-pressure working contexts like Honda Damansara (Taris, 2006; Zimianiti, 2023). Thus, the current study proposed that:

H4: Burnout syndrome mediates the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed indicates that toxic leadership negatively influences employee motivation and outcomes of an organization through, often, the intervening influence of burnout. Therefore, abusive, narcissistic, and authoritarian behaviors can constantly reduce psychological safety, engagement, and intrinsic motivation and increase emotional exhaustion and intentions to quit the job (Ronen & Donia, 2020; Semedo et al., 2022; Koç et al., 2022). Burnout has also been identified as the major mechanism that links toxic leadership to motivational declines, reduced engagement, and decline in job performance in high-pressure sectors like manufacturing and automotives (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Rich et al., 2010).

Despite extensive research on toxic leadership in healthcare, education, and public administration sectors, limited empirical evidence exists regarding its impact on employee motivation through burnout within Malaysian automotive manufacturing organizations. Specifically, no known study has examined this relationship among employees of Honda Damansara, creating an important contextual and industry-specific research gap. Moreover, the combined model of toxic leadership, burnout, and employee motivation has been underexplored, especially in Malaysian high-demand work environments. This lack arguably creates the need for empirical investigation to clarify the mediating role of burnout in the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation, which is crucial for theoretical insights as well as practical implications related to managing workforce well-being and performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between toxic leadership and

employee motivation, with burnout syndrome as a mediating variable within the manufacturing sector in Malaysia. A structured survey was adopted as the primary method of data collection, which enabled systematic measurement of the perceptions that respondents had about the main constructs. In this light, the quantitative analysis has been done to ensure objectivity, reproducibility, and statistical power in testing the hypothesized relationships. The target population included employees of Honda Damansara, a leading automobile manufacturing plant in Selangor. The minimum sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). Assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), statistical power of 0.80, and significance level of 0.05, the minimum required sample size was 77 respondents. Therefore, the final sample of 122 respondents exceeded the minimum requirement and was considered adequate for hypothesis testing. This sampling strategy was appropriate to the study objective of examining perceptions among employees of toxic leadership behavior and the impacts of such on-employee motivation within a specified organizational context. Data were collected with the use of a structured questionnaire consisting of three parts. Section A (Toxic Leadership) measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Section B (Burnout Syndrome) using a 7-point Likert scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Section C (Employee Motivation) measured on a 4-point Likert scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). All items were selected to ensure relevance and validity within the context of Malaysian manufacturing MNCs. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 128 were returned, yielding a response rate of 85.3%. After data screening, 122 usable responses remained for analysis.

The questionnaire was administered to the respondents as shown in Table 6, and the voluntary and anonymous method was used to ensure that the answers were honest and confidential. Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess common method bias. The first unrotated factor explained 32.8% of the total variance, which is below the 50% threshold. Therefore, common method bias was not considered a serious concern. Pilot studies were carried out before the full administration of the test to ensure that the language is clear and that the constructs are reliable and consistent. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in the analysis of the data generated from the test. The results were presented in descriptive, reliability, and validity statistics, and the correlation of the variables was done using the Pearson correlation test, as well as multiple regressions in determining the effect of the mediator, the burnout syndrome.

The research is positivistic in nature and hinges on the assumption that it is possible to measure and analyze certain phenomena in society in a detached fashion. The research has adopted a deductive strategy where the premise of the research has been formulated on the basis of prior knowledge and verified on the findings of data collection. The data collection adopted a cross-sectional strategy.

The study's research design takes a structure that fits well within the framework devised by Saunders et al. (2019) and encompasses several levels of a typical "research onion," which include philosophy, approach, strategy, methodological choice, as well as a consideration of a time horizon. The survey approach was adopted in order to allow for a consideration of a large quantity of quantitative data accessible in the related field of Malaysia's manufacturing industry in relation to toxic leadership practices and work-related motivations as influenced by burnout syndromes.

Overall, the methodological decisions guaranteed consistency between the research goals, analytical techniques, and philosophical position, offering a strict framework for assessing the suggested conceptual model.

Table 6 Questionnaire Design

Code	Content	Authors
Toxic Leadership		
(a) Abusive Supervision		(Semedo et al, 2022; Ana Maria Rocha et al., 2023; Koc et al., 2022)
AS1	Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace.	

AS2	Publicly belittles subordinates.	
IB5	My leader provides complete trust.	
(b) Authoritarian Leadership		
AL1	Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own.	
AL2	Controls how subordinates complete their tasks	
(c) Narcissism		
N1	Thinks that he/she is more capable than others.	
N2	Believe that he/she is an extraordinary person.	
N3	Has a sense of personal entitlement.	
(d) Self-Promotion		
SP1	Will only offer assistance to people who can help.him/her get ahead	
(e) Unpredictability		
U1	Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace.	
U2	Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons.	
Burnout Syndrome		
(a) Emotional Exhaustion		(Schmidt, 2008; Tepper, 2000; Waldiya, 2023)
E1	I feel like I've come to the end of the road.	
E2	I feel that the people I meet in my job act as if I have created some of their problems.	
E3	Working directly with people puts a lot of stress on me.	
(b) Professional Efficacy		
PS1	I create a comfortable atmosphere with the people I come across as part of my job.	
PS2	I have had many notable successes in this business.	
PS3	I approach emotional problems at work calmly.	
PS4	I am strong enough to do many things.	
(c) Depersonalization		
BC1	I have become less enthusiastic about my work.	(Abdullah et al., 2023;

BC2	I doubt the significance of my work.	Hashim, 2021; Hassan et al., 2022)
Employee Motivation		
(a) Intrinsic Motivation		(Baker et al., 2002; Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2008; Parker et al., 2010)
IM1	Receive a feeling of being involved.	
IM2	Receive help from your supervisor with personal problems.	
IM3	Find your work interesting.	
IM4	Have promotion or career development.	
IM5	Receive gratitude for a job well done.	
IM6	Receive monetary incentives for a job well done.	
IM7	Receive public celebration for a job well done.	
(b) Extrinsic Motivation		
EM1	Have job security.	
EM2	Have good wages.	
EM3	Receive tactful discipline.	
EM4	Have good working conditions (flexibility respect, understanding, support, etc.)	

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondent Profiles

This study comprised 58 male and 64 female respondents, as presented in Table 7. Female respondents constituted a slightly higher proportion of the sample at 52.5% (64 respondents), while male respondents accounted for 47.5% (58 respondents).

The age distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 7. Out of 122 respondents, the majority were aged between 25 and 34 years, with 63 respondents representing 51.6% of the sample. Respondents aged below 25 years comprised 39 respondents (32.0% of the sample). Meanwhile, 20 respondents were aged between 35 and 44 years, representing 16.4% of the respondents. Overall, the respondents were predominantly within the younger working-age group.

The frequency and proportion of the respondents' educational backgrounds are presented in Table 7. The educational level of the respondents was classified into three categories: SPM/O-Level, Diploma, and Degree. Based on Table 7, the majority of the respondents held a degree, with 54 respondents representing 44.3% of the sample. This was followed by respondents holding a Diploma, comprising 41 respondents or 33.6% of the total sample. Meanwhile, 27 respondents possessed an SPM/O-Level qualification, accounting for 22.1% of the respondents.

Table 7 Respondent Profiles

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	58	47.5
	Female	64	52.5
	Total	122	100.00
Age	Below 25 years old	39	32.0
	25-34 years	63	51.6
	35-44 years	20	16.4
	Total	122	100.0
Education Level	SPM/ O-Level	27	22.1
	Diploma	41	33.6
	Bachelor's Degree	54	44.3
	Total	122	100.0
Years of Working in the Company (Tenure)	Less than 1 year	40	32.8
	1-3 years	60	49.2
	4-6 years	20	16.4
	More than 6 years	2	1.6
	Total	122	100.0
Employment Category	Executive/ Management	37	30.3
	Administrative/ Clerical	32	26.2
	Technical/ Skilled Worker	30	24.6
	Operator/ General Worker	23	18.9
	Total	122	100.0

Table 7 present the years of working in the company for the respondents. The results show that 60 respondents have worked for 1–3 years, representing 49.2% of the total sample. This is followed by 40 respondents who have worked for less than one year, accounting for 32.8%. Meanwhile, 20 respondents reported having 4–6 years of working experience, representing 16.4% of the respondents. Only 2 respondents (1.6%) have worked for more than six years. These results indicate that the majority of respondents have relatively short tenures with the company.

Table 7 present the distribution of respondents according to their employment categories. The employment categories were classified into four groups: Executive/Management, Administrative/Clerical, Technical/Skilled Worker, and Operator/General Worker. Based on Table 7, 37 respondents were employed in

Executive/Management positions, representing 30.3% of the total sample. This is followed by 32 respondents in Administrative/Clerical roles (26.2%). Meanwhile, 30 respondents worked as Technical/Skilled Workers, accounting for 24.6% of the respondents. Lastly, 23 respondents were employed as Operators/General Workers, representing 18.9% of the total sample. The results show that respondents were fairly distributed across the different employment categories.

Objective and Hypothesis Test

Objective 1: To examine the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation

Table 8 Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.238 ^a	0.057	0.049	0.258982
a. Predictors: (Constant), Toxic Leadership				

Table 9 Anova Analysis

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.500	1	2.500	7.187	< 0.008 ^b
	Residual	41.747	120	0.348		
	Total	44.248	121			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Toxic Leadership						
b. Dependent Variable: Employee Motivation						

Table 8 and Table 9 show the R² and adjusted R² values, as well as the F-ratio. The R² value of .057 indicates that toxic leadership explains 5.7% of the variance in employee motivation, while the adjusted R² value of .049 shows a slight reduction after controlling for sample size. Although the R² is small, toxic leadership contributes to changes in employee motivation. The F-ratio (p = .008) shows the model is significant. The hypothesis proposed that toxic leadership has a direct relationship with employee motivation. Based on the findings, toxic leadership was found to have a significant effect on employee motivation, indicating that leadership behaviours perceived as toxic may influence employees' motivation levels either positively or negatively. Therefore, Hypothesis H1 is accepted.

Objective 2: To examine the relationship between toxic leadership and burnout syndrome

Table 10 Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.500 ^a	0.250	0.243	0.73930
a. Predictors: (Constant), Toxic Leadership				

It should be noted that the mediating variable presented in Tables 10 and 11 has an R² value of .250. In other words, toxic leadership accounts for 0.250 (25%) of the variation in burnout syndrome, or in the simplest form, 25% variation in burnout syndrome can be explained due to toxic leadership. Moreover, the model shows a moderate effect on burnout syndrome, with a significance of <0.001, which is less than 0.05. This indicates that

the relationship between toxic leadership and burnout syndrome is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance, confirming the systematic impact of the independent variable on the mediating variable.

For toxic leadership, the hypothesis predicted a direct effect on burnout syndrome. In Table 11, it can be observed that all significant mediating results of burnout syndrome were found, as expected. The results show a positive relationship between toxic leadership and burnout syndrome. The p-values are significant, indicating that higher levels of toxic leadership are associated with higher levels of burnout syndrome.

Table 11 Anova Analysis

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	21.816	1	21.816	39.916	< 0.001 ^b
	Residual	65.587	120	0.547		
	Total	87.403	121			
a. Predictor: Burnout Syndrome						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Toxic Leadership						

Objective 3: To examine the relationship between burnout syndrome and employee motivation

Table 12 Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.208 ^a	0.043	0.035	0.59390
Predictors: (Constant), Burnout Syndrome				

TABLE 13 ANOVA ANALYSIS

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.921	1	1.921	5.446	< 0.021 ^b
	Residual	42.327	120	0.353		
	Total	44.248	121			
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Motivation						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Burnout Syndromes						

It should be noted that for the mediating variable presented in Tables 12 and 13, the R² value is 0.043. In other words, burnout syndrome accounts for 0.043 (4.3%) of the variation in employee motivation, or in the simplest form, 4.3% variation in employee motivation can be explained due to burnout syndrome. Although the explanatory power is relatively small, employee motivation is a complex construct influenced by multiple organizational and individual factors. Therefore, statistically significant relationships with small R² values remain theoretically meaningful and consistent with prior leadership studies. Moreover, the model shows a modest effect on employee motivation, with a significance of .021, which is less than 0.05. This indicates that the relationship between burnout syndrome and employee motivation is statistically significant, confirming the

systematic impact of the mediating variable on the dependent variable.

For burnout syndrome, the hypothesis predicted a direct effect on employee motivation. In Table 4.12, it can be observed that all significant mediating results of burnout syndrome were found, as expected. This indicates a negative correlation between burnout syndrome and employee motivation, suggesting that higher burnout syndrome is associated with lower employee motivation. Thus, the hypothesis can be accepted. In addition, it is notable that burnout syndrome and employee motivation are significantly related. The values indicate a negative but significant relationship, highlighting that the higher the burnout syndrome, the lower the employee motivation. These findings will be further discussed in Chapter 5. These findings suggest that the hypothesis that there is a direct effect between burnout syndrome and employee motivation can be accepted.

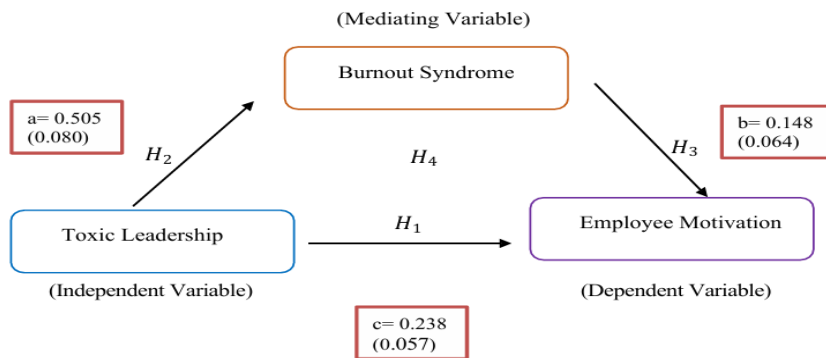


Fig. 3 Illustration of Mediation

Objective 4: To investigate the mediating burnout syndrome on the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation

Mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS Macro Version 4.2 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Mediation is supported when the 95% confidence interval does not include zero.

Table 13 Hypothesis Summary

	Hypothesis	Regression Analysis
H1	There is a relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation.	Accepted
H2	There is a relationship between toxic leadership and burnout syndrome.	Accepted
H3	There is a relationship between burnout syndrome and employee motivation.	Accepted
H4	Burnout syndrome will mediate the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation.	Accepted

DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

Objective 1: To study the direct effect of toxic leadership and employee motivation

The result from the study lends support to the hypothesis. The result indicates that toxic leadership significantly influences employee motivation since the p-value is .008, which is lower than the significance level set to 0.05. In fact, despite the R-square measure of only .057 indicating the extent to which the result explains the variation in the variable employee motivation, since it only indicates just 5.7%, the result is still significant. This indicates that toxic leadership somehow affects changes in employee motivation since the changes might be affected by other factors. These results are in line with a study carried out by Semedo, Salvador, and Dos Santos (2022) that

showed that toxic leadership is a strong demotivator as it replaces leadership behavior that empowers with behavior that manipulates, threatens, and controls. Another study carried out by the same researchers, published in 2024, confirmed that employees subjected to toxic leadership observed a strong degradation of their motivation through disregard and a lack of respect. The study conducted by Ronen and Donia in 2020 confirmed that abusive supervision kills the process of motivation by denying employees psychological empowerment.

The result indicates that toxic leadership significantly reduces employee motivation. The direct negative relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation emphasizes the importance of effective leadership in sustaining workforce morale and productivity. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (H1) is accepted.

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant direct effect of toxic leadership on employee motivation.

Objective 2: To study the direct effect of toxic leadership and burnout syndrome

The results of this research strongly support this association. As shown in Tables 4.10 and 4.11, toxic leadership was revealed to have a positive and significant association with burnout syndrome, with $R^2 = .250$, and significance of .001. This means that toxic leadership relates to 25% of the variance of burnout syndrome with a moderate effect size. The high F value confirms that this model has statistical significance and did not happen by chance. These observations are in line with the findings of a study by Koç et al. (2022), who identified that although intrinsically motivated employees can resist the effects of toxic leaders at the beginning, they ultimately experience emotional exhaustion and burnout. Along similar lines, authors Ferraro et al. (2018) identified that poor management practices affect one's psychological capital and result in burnout. This further supports the role of burnout development as stated by authors Ronen and Donia (2020) when they consider that toxic leadership affects one's psychological empowerment. Consistent with previous studies, the study confirms a significant positive relationship between toxic leadership and burnout syndrome. This finding underscores the critical role of leadership in maintaining employees' psychological health and highlights the need for organizations to address toxic behaviors in the workplace proactively.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant direct effect of toxic leadership on burnout syndrome.

Objective 3: To study the direct effect of burnout syndrome and employee motivation.

Results from the regression analysis, as presented in Table 4.12 and Table 4.13, show that burnout syndrome is a significant predictor of employee motivation, with a p-value of .021. However, the R^2 of .043 indicates that burnout syndrome only explained 4.3% of the total variation in employee motivation. Although this is a small percentage, the finding is statistically significant, thereby confirming the importance of burnout syndrome in determining levels of motivation. These results are similar to those of the Wolor et al. (2022) paper, who stated that a hostile emotional environment affects employee initiative and motivation by hindering their emotional development and communication. Additionally, the importance of employee emotional disconnection as a result of burnout in contributing to reduced motivation and commitment was stated by Ana Maria Rocha et al. (2023). These findings confirm that burnout syndrome has a significant negative effect on employee motivation. These findings underscore the importance of addressing burnout proactively to maintain high levels of engagement, productivity, and overall organizational performance.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant direct effect of burnout syndrome on employee motivation.

Objective 4: To study burnout syndrome on the effect of the relationship between toxic leadership and employee motivation

The results of the Sobel test supported that the burnout syndrome has a significant mediation role in the toxic leadership-employee motivation relationship. Referring to the graphic representation in Figure 4.12, with a p-value of 0.029, which is smaller than 0.05, it can be represented that the indirectly significant role of toxic leadership in employee motivation through burnout syndrome is statistically significant. The test statistic value was 2.171. This result is in line with the work of Koç et al. (2022), who have shown that emotional exhaustion is an essential mediator in the model from toxic leadership to demotivation. In addition, Khan et al. (2021) have

shown that toxic leadership leads to decreased emotional attachment and trust from the employee toward the leader and the organization, causing a reduction in employee motivation through the mechanism of psychological strain. The mediation result further supports the concept that burnout syndrome is a crucial mechanism explaining how toxic leadership impairs employee motivation. The result indicates a significant indirect effect of toxic leadership on employee motivation via burnout syndrome. This finding highlights the importance of addressing burnout as a mediating mechanism. It also emphasizes the need for proactive organizational interventions to maintain workforce motivation and performance.

Hypothesis 4: There is a significant indirect effect of toxic leadership on employee motivation mediated by burnout syndrome.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

Theoretical Implications

The current study fills several gaps identified in the thesis introduction, particularly concerning the relationship between toxic leadership, burnout syndrome, and employee motivation. First and foremost, this research can contribute to the conceptual knowledge regarding leadership styles and their influence on employee motivation. In the past, most empirical research has been conducted on positive leadership styles like transformational and ethical leadership. The impact of toxic leadership as an impetus in minimizing employee motivation has been less discussed in existing research (Schmidt, 2008; Tepper, 2000). The current research has been able to contribute by providing empirical support regarding the influence of toxic leadership on minimizing employee motivation in an indirect manner through burnout.

Finally, the results add to the body of literature on the subject of burnout in the context of the work environment. This study has important implications in that it confirms the role of burnout in the process of toxic leadership and the related motivations of workers in organizations (Maslach et al., 2001; Leiter & Maslach, 2009). It has been proved that workers who come in contact with higher doses of toxic leaders are affected in terms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment, and thus the workers become less motivated and less committed to the organization. Moreover, the study finds its relevance in supporting the theory of employee motivation. This is because the study reveals the effects of leadership practices on the psychological state of employees. Indeed, it has been perceived that motivation of employees may at times be affected both internally and externally (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Therefore, it can vigorously be supported that poor practices of management negatively influence these two aspects of employees' motivation by raising the levels of burnout. Apart from this, some contributions of this research to theory are brought to light. Since this research proves that burnout acts as a mediator between toxic leadership and motivation, it becomes clear that organizations having skills and experienced workers are not able to retain them unless they work on leadership styles and work environments. This work attests to the role of leadership, well-being, and retention theory integrated together, stating that retention of employees is not dependent alone on rewards or incentive schemes but on work environments as well (Aryee et al., 2007; Harms et al., 2017).

Practitioners

For Honda Damansara, the findings suggest the need to establish leadership monitoring mechanisms, burnout screening programs, and supervisor coaching initiatives. Periodic employee well-being assessments and leadership development interventions can help reduce burnout and improve motivation among operational employees.

This research reveals the extent to which toxic leaders and burnout syndrome affect employee motivation in the workplace. In this regard, it is recommended that both leaders and personnel in the human resource departments of Honda Damansara take a keen interest in observing leaders in their workplaces in order to ensure a motivating environment is created in the workplace. Secondly, the findings emphasize the need to develop strategies to mitigate burnout. Honda Damansara should implement strategies that involve stress management programs,

wellness activities, and accessible counseling services to maintain employees' psychological well-being. In fact, by actively working to combat burnout, firms can maintain a high degree of worker motivation and engagement.

Leadership is also crucial in influencing the levels and forces of employee motivation and retention. This is supported by the findings from the study, which show how transformational and ethical leadership behaviors can play an essential role in combating the adverse impact of toxic leadership. This is also supported as leadership should focus on motivating the employees, supporting them, and applauding their performance since it can help act as a burnout and motivator. Additionally, leadership skills should be incorporated into practice since it will help develop leaders who can influence positive work environments. In addition, it is highlighted in the study that employee retention relates to motivation, as well as employee welfare or wellness. Indeed, it has been found that organizations need to develop an employee retention plan that focuses not only on individual or personality factors but also on work or professional needs. Keeping happy and motivated employees not only results in improved performance, but it also makes the organization an attractive prospect for employees.

Finally, the findings point out how organizational policies and culture need to match the needs of the employees. Employer branding could play an important role in signaling an organization's commitment to a positive work environment, showing that it values the well-being of employees, and helps create an image of a workplace that is supportive and motivating. The integration of leadership development, burnout mitigation, and employee centered practices into organizational strategies may enable manufacturing firms to achieve a motivated, productive, and loyal workforce.

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