

I Will Not Consult: Toxic Leadership in Higher Education Through The Lens of Democratic Principles

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Abstract

This conceptualized paper **seeks** to explore toxic leadership in higher education through the lens of democratic principles. **The critical question** guiding this study is: *How do toxic leadership practices undermine democratic values in higher education institutions?* A **qualitative** approach with an intensive literature review encompassing scholarly books and articles within the myriads of fields as **data collection** techniques. **An interpretive paradigm** ensued as data analysis to provide deeper insights into the intricate relationship between leadership styles and democratic principles in academic environments. **Findings** revealed intricate patterns where authoritarian leadership stifles participatory decision-making, limits academic freedom of expression and diminishes institutional trust. **The study is significant** by contributing to the existing body of knowledge on leadership dynamics in higher education and offers practical insights for institutional reforms aimed at promoting inclusive governance. Nonetheless, **the study limitations** include the reliance on secondary data and the exclusion of empirical evidence which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should incorporate primary data collection for a more comprehensive understanding.

Keywords: toxic leadership, democratic principles, challenges, institutional governance,

Introduction

Conceptualization of significant constructs

According to [1], consultation in organisations is the practice of soliciting information, advice or feedback from stakeholders prior to making decisions. Undeniably, it is an important practice in educational leadership thereby providing an environment in which various perspectives contribute to institutional policies and procedures [2]. Toxic leadership, on the other hand, is defined as a leadership style characterised by abusive behaviour, manipulation and a prioritisation of self-interest over the welfare of the organisation and its academic members. Toxic leadership represents a destructive approach that significantly undermines trust, morale and the overall effectiveness of an institution. Undoubtedly, such leadership behaviors create a culture of fear and disengagement among employees, leading to high turnover rates and diminished productivity [3]. Similarly, toxic leaders often prioritize their self-interests over the well-being of their teams, resulting in a lack of collaboration and innovation [4]. Furthermore, the detrimental influence on organisational culture might dissuade potential talent and harm the institution's reputation in the broader society.

On the other hand, some may argue that toxic leadership may bring about short-term results, although the long-term repercussions frequently outweigh any temporary gains [5]. Nonetheless, encouraging excellent leadership practices is critical in establishing a supportive and effective workplace. Similarly, organisations that prioritise healthy leadership models have higher employee satisfaction and improved overall performance [6]. Addressing toxic leadership is crucial for sustaining a thriving academic or organisational community.

Undoubtedly, toxic leaders may foster an environment of fear, mistrust, and disengagement, stifling productivity and creativity [7]. Furthermore, the poor impact on morale may result in increasing turnover rates further destabilising the institution. In contrast, encouraging positive leadership strategies fosters collaboration, accountability, and a sense of belonging among all stakeholders. Similarly, [8] agree that organisations that actively try to detect and reduce toxic behaviours are more likely to have higher employee satisfaction and retention. However, disregarding these challenges might have long-term consequences for the institution's reputation and performance. Thus, leadership must prioritise healthy practices that foster trust and support by cultivating a dynamic and productive academic community [9].

Prudentialism as a critical Component of Consultation in Higher Education

Dayan (2024) confirms that prudentialism is increasingly valued for its emphasis on practical wisdom and the ability to navigate uncertainty in decision-making. Undoubtedly, this approach is consistent with ethical pragmatism, encouraging individuals and organisations to consider the real-world consequences of their decisions [10]. Furthermore, prudentialism supports a mindset that values thoughtful and responsible actions which is critical in complex and rapidly changing situations [11]. Similarly, it provides a framework that balances competing interests and ethical considerations by promoting a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues. Conversely, some may argue that prudentialism can lead to indecision or overly cautious behavior [12]. Nonetheless, its strengths in fostering adaptive and reflective practices make it a valuable principle for leaders and policymakers alike [13]. In the same vein, incorporating prudentialism into decision-making processes can enhance accountability and trust within organizations. Clearly, [14] believes that high echelon managerial positions require individuals with distinct acumen attributed by higher cognitive thinking skills, otherwise disaster and chaos will prevail.

Thus, from what is outlined above, it is significant to note that consultation is a fundamental principle in fostering democratic values within higher education institutions [15]. By engaging faculty academics and staff in decision-making processes through wide consultation, institutions can create a more inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and heard [16]. Thus, [17] believes that in countries like Canada and Sweden, consultation processes in universities have led to the development of policies that reflect the diverse needs of the academic community. In Canada, the University of Toronto has implemented a series of town hall meetings to discuss curriculum changes which has resulted in policies that are more representative of academic needs [18]. Similarly, Sweden's higher education system emphasizes collaborative governance thereby allowing stakeholders to have a say in institutional governance, thus enhancing accountability and transparency based on comprehensive consultations [19].

In contrast, in countries like South Africa and Nigeria, the lack of consultation has led to significant unrest and dissatisfaction among academic staff. As a result, South Africa has

experienced widespread protests against university management decisions perceived as exclusionary or not reflective of the academic freedom of expressions and consultations [20]. Therefore, implementing comprehensive consultation practices is essential to prevent the alienation of stakeholders within academic institutions. This approach fosters a collaborative environment where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into decision-making processes. Undoubtedly, when faculty, staff and academics are widely consulted and actively engaged, the resulting policies and initiatives are more likely to resonate with the broader academic community [21]. In addition, inclusive consultation can enhance trust and transparency which are vital for fostering a positive institutional culture. Similarly, [3] discovered that when academics feel heard and respected, they are more likely to support leadership decisions thereby leading to greater commitment and morale across the institution. On the contrary, neglecting consultation can result in discontent and resistance ultimately undermining the effectiveness of leadership. Nonetheless, [11] believe that the benefits of comprehensive consultation extend beyond immediate decision-making, they help cultivate a sense of ownership and accountability among academics. In the same vein, strong consultation practices can position institutions as responsive and adaptive to the ever-changing educational landscape by ensuring their long-term success.

Root Causes Regarding Toxic Leadership Practices

Nonetheless, it is essential to explore the root causes of toxic leadership in higher education. One significant factor is the lack of accountability mechanisms within institutions. When leaders operate without oversight, they may feel emboldened to engage in abusive practices, knowing that there will be little to no repercussions [22]. Additionally, a culture that prioritizes results over the means by which those results are achieved can foster an environment where toxic behaviors are tolerated or even rewarded. In the same vein, systemic issues such as inadequate training and support for emerging leaders can contribute to the perpetuation of toxic leadership. As a matter of fact, leaders who lack the skills to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics may resort to authoritarian practices, creating a negative cycle that undermines democratic principles [11]. Therefore, addressing these root causes through comprehensive training programs and establishing clear accountability structures is critical in mitigating the impact of toxic leadership in higher education.

Exploring toxic leadership through the lens of democratic principles highlights the critical importance of consultation and accountability in higher education, as its adverse effects not only impact individual academics but also tarnish institutional reputation. [15] discovered that Countries like Canada and Sweden demonstrate the benefits of consultation, while South Africa and Nigeria highlight the consequences of neglecting this essential practice. Therefore, institutions must prioritize healthy leadership practices and address the root causes of toxic leadership to foster an inclusive and productive academic environment. Undoubtedly, recognizing and mitigating toxic behaviors is essential for creating a culture of trust and collaboration [8]. In addition, implementing comprehensive training programs for leaders can equip them with the skills necessary to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, thereby reducing the likelihood of toxic behaviors emerging. On the other hand, institutions that fail to address these issues risk alienating faculty and staff, which can lead to low morale and increased turnover [17]. Similarly, fostering an environment where open communication and feedback are encouraged can significantly enhance stakeholder engagement and satisfaction. On the contrary, [22] believes that ignoring these factors can perpetuate a cycle of dysfunction,

making it vital to prioritize healthy leadership practices for cultivating a thriving academic community.

Adversarial Effects of Toxic Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

Undoubtedly, toxic leadership has adverse effects on various aspects of higher education institutions. Clearly, [19] argue that toxic leaders often prioritize their interests over organizational goals, leading to a culture of fear and mistrust. As a result, this environment adversely affects faculty and staff morale resulting in decreased productivity and increased turnover rates [18]. In this instance, a toxic leader at a university may implement arbitrary changes that disregard faculty input by leading to dissatisfaction and a decline in academic performance [23]. In addition, the reputation of the institution suffers when toxic leadership prevails. Negative media coverage and public perception can deter prospective students and faculty, ultimately affecting enrolments and funding. Thus, institutions in Nigeria have faced scrutiny for leadership practices that foster a hostile work environment which has had detrimental effects on their global standing [24]. Conversely, institutions that promote healthy leadership practices and prioritize consultation tend to maintain positive reputations and attract high-quality faculty and academics.

In the same vein, [25] hold a view that when leaders actively engage stakeholders in decision-making processes, they foster an inclusive environment that enhances trust and collaboration. Therefore, [26] found that this engagement not only improves morale but also encourages innovative ideas and solutions, benefiting the institution as a whole. In addition, a positive organizational culture built on transparency and respect can significantly enhance the institution's appeal to prospective faculty members. Similarly, institutions known for their collaborative leadership are more likely to receive favourable attention from funding bodies and research partners [27]. On the other hand, neglecting these practices can lead to reputational damage and difficulty in recruiting top talent. Thus, prioritizing healthy leadership and consultation is essential for long-term success and stability in the academic landscape [28].

This conceptual paper **seeks** to explore toxic leadership in higher education through the lens of democratic principles.

The critical question guiding this study is: *How do toxic leadership practices undermine democratic values in higher education institutions?*

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study examines toxic leadership in higher education through the lens of democratic principles by drawing upon transformational leadership theory (TLT) and deliberative democracy theory (DDT). Transformational leadership theory emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring and empowering their teams to achieve shared goals, fostering collaboration and promoting ethical practices [29]. Toxic leadership, characterized by authoritarianism, manipulation and exclusion, directly contradicts these ideals by undermining trust and participation within academic environments. Deliberative democracy theory which values inclusive dialogue, transparency and stakeholder active engagement including wide consultations provides a contrasting lens to evaluate leadership practices in higher education [30]. When leaders disregard democratic principles such as consultation and collective decision-making processes, it disrupts institutional harmony and erodes the foundational values of academic freedom and shared governance. By integrating these theories, this framework

highlights the extreme detrimental effects of toxic leadership on institutional culture, stakeholder relationships and educational outcomes. It also puts emphasis on the importance of aligning leadership practices with democratic values to foster environments where collaboration, equity and accountability thrive. This theoretical foundation informs the exploration of strategies to mitigate toxic leadership and promote democratic governance in higher education institutions.

Methodology

Data collection

This study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing an intensive literature review of scholarly books and articles published on the topic under discussion. The review focuses on the topic under discussion thereby providing insights into current research, identifying gaps and exploring relevant theories and practices [31]. This approach ensures a comprehensive insight of the subject within its contemporary context.

Data analysis

The study adopts a qualitative method by relying on an intensive literature review of scholarly books and articles published on the subject under discussion and analysed within an interpretive paradigm. Data analysis adopted is underpinned by scholarly perspectives thereby providing deeper insights into “exploring toxic leadership in higher education through the lens of democratic principles.” ensuring a comprehensive insight of the phenomenon under discussion.

Findings

Toxic leadership in higher education often manifests through a disregard for democratic principles particularly the values of comprehensive consultation and inclusivity. As a result, when leaders make unilateral decisions without engaging stakeholders’ faculty, staff and academics dissent and feelings of alienation easily develop and can flourish. This lack of consultation undermines trust thereby leading to a toxic environment where faculty feel undervalued and disengaged from the institution’s mission. In many cases, leaders who refuse to consult create a culture of fear by disregarding open dialogue, freedom of expression and critical feedback [32]. Such environments stifle innovation and creativity, as faculty academic members may hesitate to voice their ideas or concerns. The repercussions are widespread, affecting not only individual morale but also the overall academic culture. Conversely, institutions that embrace democratic principles by prioritizing stakeholder engagement tend to foster a sense of ownership and commitment among faculty. When leaders actively seek inputs and consider diverse perspectives, they cultivate a collaborative atmosphere that enhances institutional effectiveness and resilience. In the same vein, this suggests that addressing toxic leadership through the lens of democratic principles can lead to meaningful change. By promoting transparency and accountability, institutions can mitigate the negative impacts of toxic behaviors and create a more inclusive academic environment. Thus, [33]. Suggest that fostering healthy leadership practices that align with democratic values is essential for ensuring the sustainability and success of higher education institutions.

Discussion

Neo-liberalism and Managerialism as global institutional driving forces

[34] found that Neo-liberalism and managerialism have emerged as dominant forces in higher education often promoting a culture that prioritizes efficiency and profit over democratic engagement and academic freedom. Undoubtedly, [6] believes that in this framework, decision-making is frequently centralized thereby leading to a disconnect between leadership and faculty which fosters the sentiment of "I was not consulted, and I will not consult." This toxic leadership style undermines collaboration and stifles diverse perspectives essential for a vibrant academic community. Therefore, [12] maintain a view that under neo-liberalism, institutions are pressured to operate like businesses by focusing on metrics and outcomes rather than the holistic development of academics and faculty staff. On the other hand, Managerialism further exacerbates this issue by promoting a top-down approach by diminishing the role of scholarly input in governance [29]. Consequently, the refusal to consult stakeholders not only alienates faculty academics and staff but also jeopardizes the integrity of academic institutions [11]. Thus, to counteract these trends, higher education must reclaim democratic principles by emphasizing comprehensive consultation, transparency and shared governance to ensure that all voices contribute to shaping the academic landscape [35].

Fundamental Democratic principles

Fundamental democratic principles are crucial in addressing toxic leadership in higher education particularly in the context of "I was not consulted, and I will not consult." These principles include inclusivity, accountability, transparency and shared governance [36]. Therefore, [37] believes that inclusivity ensures that all stakeholders faculty, staff and academics have a voice in decision-making processes. Clearly, this fosters a sense of belonging and empowers individuals to contribute their unique perspectives, essential for a thriving academic community. As a result, accountability requires leaders to be answerable to their constituents, promoting trust and engagement [38]. Undoubtedly, transparency in communication helps to dismantle barriers by allowing for open dialogue and constructive feedback. Similarly, [39] found that shared governance is vital because it encourages collaboration among all levels of the institution by ensuring that decisions reflect the collective interests of the academic community rather than a selected few. In the same vein, by grounding leadership practices in these democratic principles, higher education institutions can combat toxic leadership thereby create a more equitable environment and ultimately enhance academic freedom and innovation by benefiting the entire academic community [40].

Ethical Theoretical Tenets and practices

According to [41] the ethical theoretical tenets of leadership in higher education emphasize the importance of integrity, justice and respect for individuals which are essential for countering toxic leadership exemplified by the phrase "I was not consulted, and I will not consult." Therefore, [42] suggest that these tenets should advocate for a participatory approach where all voices are valued by fostering a culture of inclusion and collaboration. Undoubtedly, integrity demands that leaders act in the best interests of their academic communities, prioritizing ethical considerations over personal or institutional gain. As a matter of principle, justice requires fair treatment and equitable opportunities for input in decision-making processes by ensuring that marginalized voices are heard [43]. Clearly, [44] believe that respect for individuals involves

recognizing the inherent worth of each stakeholder by promoting an environment where diverse perspectives contribute to the institution's growth. Thus, [37] holds a view that practices rooted in these ethical principles include establishing transparent communication channels, encouraging feedback and creating forums for dialogue among faculty academics, staff. As a result, by embodying these ethical tenets, leaders can cultivate an environment that supports academic freedom which nurtures innovation and enhances the overall well-being of the academic community thereby countering the detrimental effects of toxic leadership [45].

Understanding Toxic Leadership in Higher Education

[46] maintain that toxic leadership practices in higher education institutions significantly undermine democratic values by fostering an environment of fear, disillusionment, disengagement and inequity. It is worth noting that these practices manifest through autocratic decision-making, lack of transparency and the exclusion of faculty academics and staff from critical and constructive discussions [11]. In this instance, when university administrators impose policies without consulting faculty academics, they not only disregard the expertise and perspectives of those directly affected but also create a culture where dissent is discouraged [47]. This approach can lead to a demoralized workforce as faculty members may feel undervalued and alienated from the institution's mission. Concomitantly, the absence of collaborative governance undermines the foundational democratic principle of inclusivity which is vital for fostering a thriving academic community [48].

Moreover, the adversarial effects of toxic leadership extend beyond individual morale to impact the institutional reputation. Undoubtedly, [49] thinks that institutions which are known for toxic leadership may struggle to attract and retain top talented academics, as prospective faculty academics often seek environments that promote shared governance and academic freedom. As a result, a university that is notorious for micromanagement and disregard for faculty academic inputs may face declining retention as academics seek more supportive and democratic educational atmospheres. Similarly, negative media coverage about leadership failures can damage an institution's public image thereby leading to long-term consequences for funding and partnerships [50]. In the same vein, the lack of ethical leadership can erode trust among stakeholders, making it difficult to implement necessary changes in the future.

Mitigation Strategies to Foster Democratic Values

To counter the adverse effects of toxic leadership, it is significant to note that institutions must adopt comprehensive strategies aimed at fostering democratic values. According to [51], among the most important is implementing regular forums for open dialogue between administration and faculty can create a space for meaningful consultation. Clearly, these forums should encourage feedback on policies by ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. In addition, establishing clear channels for reporting grievances can empower faculty and staff to voice concerns without fear of retaliation thereby promoting a culture of accountability [52]. Furthermore, training programs focused on ethical leadership and shared governance can equip leaders with the necessary skills to engage collaboratively with their communities. On the contrary, institutions should also evaluate their leadership structures to ensure that decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive [27]. Thus, adopting a participatory governance model can facilitate shared responsibility among faculty, staff, and administration by fostering a sense of ownership over institutional policies. This approach not only enhances faculty morale but also reinforces the democratic values that are foundational to higher education.

Nonetheless, [39] highlight that it is crucial for leaders to model ethical behavior by demonstrating a commitment to values that prioritize collaboration and respect.

The Significance of Democratic Principles

Undoubtedly, toxic leadership practices in higher education undermine democratic values by creating environments that discourage collaboration and inclusivity [45]. Thus, the negative implications of these practices affect not only faculty morale and institutional reputation but also the overall mission of academic institutions. It is essential for higher education leaders to recognize the significance of fostering a democratic culture that values transparency, accountability and shared governance [17]. By implementing effective mitigation strategies, institutions can move towards a more equitable and supportive academic environment ultimately enhancing both their reputations and the educational experiences they offer.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism, despotism and autocratic hegemonic practices are premised on the tenets of temporality thereby leading to self-destruction. Undeniably, the phrase "I was not consulted, and I will not consult" starkly illustrates the toxic leadership that undermines the democratic foundations that are operative in higher education institutions. Thus, academic freedom and expression are vital to scholarly pursuits thereby deriving strength from diverse scholarly perspectives and collaborative dialogue [53]. Regrettably, ignoring these principles not only alienates faculty academics and staff but also exacerbates and jeopardizes the institution's intellectual vitality. Undoubtedly, toxic leadership as characterized by autocratic decision-making leads to a culture of fear and disengagement by stifling innovation and diminishing academics' morale. This neglect is detrimental because it creates an environment where creativity is suppressed and critical objectivity discourse is silenced through a double edged sword. Clearly, embracing democratic principles, where consultation and inclusivity are prioritized is essential for reversing this ill trends and practices [54]. By fostering an atmosphere of open communication, leaders can restore trust, encourage academic freedom and empower faculty academic members. This approach not only enriches the academic community but also ensures the long-term sustainability of the institution.

Recommendations

Undoubtedly, higher education institutions can never be compared to governance in kindergartens because these are multicomplex global institutionalized organisations underpinned by intricate world economic markets driven using competitiveness and are capitalistic as in their fundamentals. Thus, higher education institutions must prioritize inclusive decision-making processes by establishing regular forums for faculty academics and staff inputs. Unequivocally, leaders should actively seek diverse perspectives, fostering a culture of open communication and collaboration [55]. The implementation of feedback mechanisms can help identify issues early and encourage active engagement to sought for problem oriented solutions. Again, professional development programs focusing on ethical and democratic leadership principles can also equip leaders with the necessary skills to navigate institutional complexities. Ultimately, promoting transparency and accountability is essential for rebuilding trust and creating a thriving academic environment that values all voices.

Autobiography

Dr. Saltiel Khololo Collen Mataboge is a Senior Lecturer at the University of South Africa in the Department of Educational Leadership and Management. Research interests encompass instructional leadership in schools, Transformative leadership and management in schools, school safety, violence, social justice for students in schools, schools' financial management, school governance, mentorship and mentoring. I authored and published several articles and a peer reviewed book regarding contemporary issues in the field of education.

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