

# The effect of toxic leadership on turnover intention and counterproductive work behaviour in Indonesia public organisations

Effect of toxic leadership

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Leadership has been known for its tremendous impact on employees' outcomes in any organisation. Constructive leadership positively impacts employees, while destructive leadership causes counterproductive work behaviours (CWB). This study aims to investigate the effect of toxic leadership on employees' CWB via the role of turnover intention by employing the psychological contract theory.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The participants were recruited using various recruitment methods such as online recruitment and alumni networks. After dropping some participants who failed to complete the three-wave data collection procedure, 457 responses were used for the final data analysis. The participants came from various public organisations in Indonesia (e.g. hospitals).

**Findings** – The results found that the effect of toxic leadership on employees' CWB was mediated by the role of turnover intention. Under a toxic leader, employees might intend to leave the organisations and commit CWB as the employees perceived the psychological contract breach.

**Practical implications** – Firstly, public organisations should implement some strategies to reduce the emergence of toxic behaviours. Secondly, public organisations should evaluate and examine how leadership is exercised within public organisations. Lastly, the organisations must ensure that their leaders do not breach employees' psychological contracts.

**Originality/value** – This study has highlighted the effect of toxic leadership on CWB in public service organisations by employing a psychological contract theory and a power distance perspective.

**Keywords** Toxic leadership, Turnover intention, Counterproductive work behaviours, Psychological contract, and public organisation

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

Leaders in public sectors are the source of a leadership process, and followers are the object of the leader's behaviours (Ospina, 2017). In public sectors, leaders are expected to show some

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desired behaviours while followers must constructively respond to the behaviours (Boin and T'Hart, 2003). At the individual level, leadership in the public sector also involves leader-follower interactions. This relational process is pivotal in leadership as the nature of leadership involves social interactions within a context (Clark *et al.*, 2014). This relational process is shaped by leaders and those they interact with (Hartley, 2018). In some situations, leaders need to foster some political astuteness to control this dyadic relationship in public sectors (Hartley *et al.*, 2019; Ricard *et al.*, 2017).

Understanding leadership in a public sphere is challenging and complex because the actors need to balance between the administrative requirement and the increasing dynamic circumstances (Murphy *et al.*, 2017). In the process of balancing demands and requirements, leaders potentially act aggressively, particularly when they experience resource depletion, abusive climate, and high-performance systems in the workplace (Aryee *et al.*, 2008; Rice *et al.*, 2021; Sharma, 2018; Tepper *et al.*, 2011). Some scholars had indicated the positive impact of leadership in public sectors (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2006; Anne Loewenberger *et al.*, 2014; Tuan, 2016; Ugaddan and Park, 2017). In the last five years, more studies found the negative effect of destructive leader behaviours in public organisations (Gabriel, 2016; Khan *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2020; Vogel *et al.*, 2016).

Regardless of the types of organisations, leaders with destructive behaviours deteriorate organisation performance and negatively affect employees' mental health (Erickson *et al.*, 2015; Nyberg *et al.*, 2011; Shaw *et al.*, 2014; Woestman and Wasonga, 2015). Destructive leadership is not the only term used to describe leaders with deviant behaviours. Some forms of destructive leadership also raise some concerns from both scholars and practitioners. Scholars have used many terms to describe a leader's destructive behaviours such as abusive supervision or abusive supervisory behaviours (Tepper, 2000), toxic leadership (Pelletier, 2010), supervisor incivility (Johnson and Indvik, 2001), and the dark side of leadership (Mathieu *et al.*, 2014).

Unlike the other forms of destructive and dysfunctional leadership, toxic leadership appears to be more inclusive in terms of the type of behaviours and its destructive effects (MacLennan, 2017; Mehta and Maheshwari, 2013; Singh *et al.*, 2017; Yi Chua *et al.*, 2015). Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) found that the construct included abusiveness, promoting inequity, and lack of integrity. Lipman-Blumen (2008), Mehta and Maheshwari (2013), and Mehta and Maheshwari (2013) postulated that toxic leadership could cause a destructive effect on employees' mental health and performance and attenuate organisation performance. Toxic leaders' behaviours could emerge from the highest-level position (e.g. director) to the lowest-level leadership position (e.g. supervisor).

While all types of destructive leadership could cause harm to employees and organisations, the emergence of toxic leadership might destruct not only the leader-follower dyadic relationship but also the whole mechanism of leadership (Başkan, 2020). Following Murphy's *et al.* (2017) argument, leadership in public sectors is complex because it departs from lower-level social interactions (i.e. leader-follower relationship) to a higher administrative system (i.e. state and national policies). Unlike positive leader behaviours (e.g. charismatic leadership), leaders' toxic behaviours are contagious, and their negative effects could cascade and influence the whole leadership process (Jiang and Gu, 2016; Wo *et al.*, 2019).

Some scholars have proposed that traditional leadership concepts (e.g. transformational leadership and transactional leadership) have not comprehensively explained the complex leadership process within public organisations (Ospina, 2017; Van Wart, 2003). Unlike private sectors, public sector leaders must be able to decode, challenge, and transform values and goals set by government structures (Pedersen and Hartley, 2008). There is a need to further reveal how leadership is performed in the public sector. Although some traditional leadership concepts and sectors (e.g. private) could share some similarities with public leadership at the individual-level process, the dynamic process and tendency to align the administrative tasks and organisational performance make the public sector leadership distinct from other

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leadership practices (Clark *et al.*, 2014; Murphy *et al.*, 2017; Ospina, 2017). Toxic leadership is relatively a new concept in leadership literature, and understanding its impact on public sectors is vital.

In many public organisations, toxic behaviours are less accepted and potentially deteriorate leader-follower social interactions, which could cause detrimental effects to employees' well-being, attitude, and performance (Bansal and Malhotra, 2018; Gabriel, 2016; Vogel *et al.*, 2016; Zaabi *et al.*, 2018). Interestingly, while in many organisations, a leader's toxicity caused unpleasant experiences to employees (Pelletier, 2010), Reed and Bullis (2009) found no significant impact of supervisor's toxicity on follower's retention because the forces adopted unique military values, and they tended to tolerate toxic behaviours perpetrated by their supervisors. Thus, this study raised a question regarding how leaders' toxic behaviours influence employees' intention to quit and eventually trigger employees' counterproductive work behaviours in public sectors.

### Literature review and hypotheses

This study investigates the effect of toxic leadership on CWB via the role of turnover intention. Toxic leadership is a leader's behaviours characterised by abusive, authoritarian, narcissistic, self-promotion, and unpredictable behaviours (Schmidt and Hanges, 2008). Turnover intention occurs when employees consciously and deliberately will leave the organisation within a specific time interval such as six months or one year (Meyer *et al.*, 1993), while CWB is destructive work behaviours displayed by employees, and these behaviours are harmful to both organisations and its members (Sackett and DeVore, 2002).

The link between a leader's behaviours and an employee's intention to quit was evident in many studies (Pradhan *et al.*, 2019; Rahim and Cosby, 2016; Seo and Chung, 2019; Xu *et al.*, 2018). For instance, abusive supervision increased employees' turnover intention (Ahmad and Begum, 2020; Mathieu and Babiak, 2016; Pradhan *et al.*, 2019; Richard *et al.*, 2020). On the contrary, some positive leadership styles tended to reduce the emergence of turnover intention (Amunkete and Rothmann, 2015; Sun and Wang, 2017). Toxic leadership could have increased employees' intention to quit, as leaders with toxic behaviours could harm employees' well-being and increase employee dissatisfaction (Mehta and Maheshwari, 2013). A similar pattern could emerge in most public organisations as the social interactions between leaders and followers are shaped by expectations. These expectations are not written but perceived as obligations set by leaders and followers (Rousseau, 1989, 1990). Toxic behaviours that are perpetrated by leaders in public sectors could cause a breach of expectations.

Furthermore, some scholars have postulated that toxic leadership had a detrimental impact on employees' performance (Behery *et al.*, 2018; Mehta and Maheshwari, 2013; Zaabi *et al.*, 2018). Toxic leadership potentially stimulates a toxic and destructive climate (Mehta and Maheshwari, 2013) by climbing the organisation ladder, where those leaders become more powerful and influential. This study also viewed that any forms of bad behaviours from leaders, including toxic behaviours, would trigger the emergence of counterproductive behaviours. Under a stressful situation and resources are lacking, employees could retaliate against their leaders by displaying counterproductive behaviours (Kim and Shapiro, 2008; Lian *et al.*, 2014). Although most studies have shown the destructive effect of bad leadership on employee outcomes (Fosse *et al.*, 2019; Mackey *et al.*, 2021), different countries and cultures showed some inconsistent results. For instance, high power distance people might tolerate their leader's mistreatments and are more likely to approach the leaders (Peltokorpi, 2019) even though they still showed an intention to leave the organisation (Richard *et al.*, 2020).

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Considering the above discussion, the direct impact of toxic leadership on turnover intention and CWB needs further investigation in a high power distance country such as Indonesia. According to some global surveys (Hofstede, 1983; Yoo *et al.*, 2011), Indonesia is considered a high power distance country. Apart from cultural values, Daraba *et al.* (2021) found that employees in Indonesian public organisations tolerated directive and dominant leaders (Ladegaard, 2012; Lam and Xu, 2019). Hypothetically, public organisations in Indonesia are influenced by a high power distance value in which dominant and aggressive leader's behaviours are more tolerated (Peltokorpi, 2019; Tepper *et al.*, 2009). However, evidence is still scarce on how toxic leadership influence employees' intention to quit and counterproductive behaviours in Indonesia.

This study employs psychological contract theory to explain the indirect impact of toxic leadership on CWB via the role of turnover intention. A psychological contract can be defined as an employee's belief about the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the employee and the organisation (Rousseau, 1989). This belief is perceptual, subjective, and may not be shared by others (Robinson, 1996). In an organisational context, the psychological contract is reciprocal obligations between employees and employers (Rousseau, 1990). A psychological contract breach emerges when an employee experiences a discrepancy between what was promised (e.g. safety) and what they receive (e.g. mistreatment) within an organisational context (Lambert *et al.*, 2003; Robinson and Wolfe Morrison, 2000). Psychological contract breach was associated positively with turnover intention and negatively with performance (Zhao *et al.*, 2007).

While people could still engage and perform under a destructive boss (Fiset *et al.*, 2019), the intention to leave the organisation would remain in their minds. Employees may engage in some forms of subtle destructive behaviours, such as the intention to quit their job (Richard *et al.*, 2020) and silence (Lam and Xu, 2019; Pradhan *et al.*, 2019b) when they are abused by their leaders. Turnover intention becomes an interesting consequence of toxic leadership because employees in public service could retain their jobs while at the same time they have an intention to leave the organisations.

According to Rousseau (1990), employees might perceive that their employers and the organisation do not provide job security as their leaders continuously perpetrate toxic treatments. They might not directly show their retaliatory behaviours as power imbalance is accepted and endorsed in a high power distance culture (Richard *et al.*, 2020). However, this circumstance causes intense emotional reactions and motivates employees to leave the job (i.e. turnover intention) or show some forms of CWB. This theoretical argument leads to the first hypothesis.

*Toxic Leadership positively influences employees' turnover intention (hypothesis 1a) and CWB (hypothesis 1b) in public service organisations.*

Research has shown that employees who had an intention to quit their jobs were more likely to engage in high CWB and low extra-role behaviours (Jiang *et al.*, 2019; Saeed and Waseem, 2014; Xiong and Wen, 2020). Employees who anticipate that their relationship with the organisation has an end-point or they plan to discontinue the relationship with the organisation are more likely to reduce their performance standards (Heide and Miner, 1992). They are also less motivated in attaining performance goals and consequently engage in CWB (Hui *et al.*, 2007). The employee's turnover intention has adverse impacts on employees' daily work behaviours, such as hindering innovation (Jiang *et al.*, 2019) and deteriorating desirable work outcomes (Xiong and Wen, 2020).

As proposed earlier, a leader's toxic behaviours are positively associated with turnover intention. Furthermore, the turnover intention might cause employees to reduce their efforts which consequently lower their performance and potentially increase CWB. Thus, employees who received toxic treatments from their leaders are more likely to show high turnover intention, which also increases their likelihood to commit CWB. In other words, the effect of a

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leader's toxicity on employees' CWB is mediated by employees' turnover intention. Considering this argument, the next hypothesis will be:

*The impact of toxic leadership on CWB is mediated by turnover intention (Hypothesis 2)*

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## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

This study recruited participants from various public organisations (i.e. hospital, school, university, public transport office, and municipal office) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A variety of methods was used to recruit participants. The majority of the participants were recruited via an online survey platform. Some participants were recruited via professional networks such as university alumni networks and employees' associations. The data collection targeted full-time employees who had been working for at least one year. The study was advertised for three weeks to 851 employees working in public service organisations. After three weeks, 672 (79% response rate) employees agreed to participate in the study. They all received information via their email or online messaging services regarding the study, including a concern form and an instruction to participate.

This study employed a multi-wave data collection technique to reduce the effect of common method variance (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). This study employed a three-wave data collection procedure with a two-week gap. In the first wave, participants were asked to complete the first part of the survey consisting of demographic questions (e.g. gender) and a toxic leadership measure. Then, participants were asked to complete turnover intention and CWB measure in the second and third waves. The number of participants dropped as the data collection moved from phase one to phase three. Initially, 602 participants completed the survey in phase one, 554 completed phase two, and 460 participants completed phase three. Participants who only completed one or two phases in the data collection were excluded from the analysis. Also, three participants were excluded from the final list because they failed the attention check items.

Finally, 457 useable responses (61% response rate) came from hospitals (102, 22%), schools (89, 19%), universities (110, 24%), public transport offices (76, 17%), and municipal offices (80, 17.5%). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to identify significant differences between the organisations. The results showed no significant differences ( $p > 0.05$ ) for toxic leadership, turnover intention, and CWB. The number of male and female participants was nearly equal (52% female and 48% male). Most participants had worked for more than ten years with a mean age of 38 (SD = 10.63). Many of them held a bachelor's degree (60%), and some only had a high school diploma (11.4%). The majority of the participants were only regular staff without leadership positions (82.9%), while the rest served a leadership role (e.g. supervisor) in the last six months.

### *Measures*

All measures were administered using Bahasa Indonesia, the official language of Indonesian. Three measures (i.e. toxic leadership, turnover intention, and CWB) were adapted from English to Bahasa Indonesia using the translate and back-translated method (Brislin, 1970). The other additional measures (i.e. demographic questions and attention check) were developed by researchers using Bahasa Indonesia. The following will explain more about each measure in this study.

*Toxic leadership scale.* Toxic leadership was measured using the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt and Hanges, 2008). This scale measures employees' experience with their immediate leader's destructive behaviours. The scale contains 30 items from five dimensions (Abusive supervision, Authoritarian Leadership, Narcissism, Self-Promotion, and Unpredictability)

where each dimension has six items. The scale was administered using a five-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Compared to other similar measures (e.g. Cortina *et al.*, 2001; Paulhus and Williams, 2002; Tepper, 2000), this scale was chosen because it described observable behaviours and represented various types of destructive leader behaviours. The items included “holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions.” Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) showed a five-factor solution confirming the theoretical construct of the scale ( $\chi^2/df = 2.5$ , RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.05, and TLI = 0.91). The scale showed high reliability with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient 0.94.

*Turnover intention scale.* The turnover intention was measured using the Turnover Intention Scale (Michaels and Spector, 1982). This scale measures employee’s intention to voluntarily leave the organisation or workplace within the last six months. The scale contained three items and was administered using a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). The scale was selected because it is brief, reliable, and has been widely used by many researchers in organisational studies. “I often seriously consider leaving my current job” is one of the items on the scale. The CFA results confirmed that the scale had a single factor ( $\chi^2/df = 2$ , RMSEA = 0.01, SRMR = 0.01, and TLI = 0.99). The scale had acceptable reliability with Cronbach’s alpha 0.70.

*Counterproductive work behaviour scale (CWBS).* Counterproductive Work Behaviour was measured using a five-item Counterproductive Work Behaviour Scale from the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ). The IWPQ was initially developed by Koopmans *et al.* (2012). This scale measures the frequency of CWB perpetrated by an employee. The scale is a self-report performance measure administered using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = never to 5 = always). “I spoke with colleagues about the negative aspects of my work” is one of the items on the scale. Using the CFA technique, the results showed a three-factor model ( $\chi^2/df = 2$ , RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.08) where CWBS was reported as an independent dimension. The reliability of CWBS was acceptable with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient 0.78.

*Demographic variables.* Participants’ demographic information was also collected using self-report questions. The demographic questions included gender, age, tenure, last attained education level, and leadership role. Age and tenure were reported in year, while gender and leadership role were dummy coded (male and leader were coded 1). Education levels were coded from 1 to 6, where 0 for participants who only had a high school diploma, 1, 2, and 3 represented Diploma 1, 2, and 3, respectively, and 4, 5, and 6 represented bachelor’s degree, masters, and doctoral degree, respectively.

*Attention check items.* This study anticipated some potential careless responses during the online data collection. Previous studies have identified some methods to eliminate participants with careless responses (Aruguete *et al.*, 2019; Curran, 2016; Meade and Craig, 2012; Niessen *et al.*, 2016). According to these studies, a researcher can randomly insert some bogus items to identify whether they read the items with enough effort before submitting their responses. This study inserted two bogus items (i.e. “please tick strongly disagree for this item,” and “if you read this item, please select agree”). Participants who failed the attention check item were excluded from the analysis.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

*Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.* The correlations between variables showed that all demographic variables were not significantly associated with the focal variables in this study (i.e. toxic leadership, turnover intention, and CWB), except for turnover intention and education level ( $r = -0.10, p < 0.05$ ). This correlation indicated that employees’ turnover intention was related to their education level. Employees with higher education could have

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No	Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Age	38.08 (10.63)	—						
2	Tenure	12.08 (10.87)	0.75***	—					
3	Gender	0.42 (0.49)	0.01	0.07	—				
4	Job level	0.17 (0.38)	-0.31***	-0.18***	-0.12**	—			
5	Education	5.40 (1.82)	0.08	-0.02	-0.04	-0.21***	—		
6	TL	48.80 (18.23)	-0.03	-0.01	0.02	0.06	-0.02	—	
7	TI	5.83 (2.71)	-0.05	0.10	0.02	-0.03	-0.10*	0.27***	—
8	CWB	7.87(3.18)	-0.03	-0.02	0.03	0.05	-0.01	0.15**	0.10*

**Note(s):**  $N = 457$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , gender (0 = female, 1 = male), job level (0 = staff, 1 = supervise at least one subordinate), education (0 = high school diploma to 6 = doctoral degree) TL = Toxic Leadership, TI = Turnover Intention, and CWB= Counterproductive Work Behaviours

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

lower turnover intention than those with lower educational attainment. Surprisingly, job level was also negatively associated with age ( $r = -0.31, p < 0.001$ ), tenure ( $r = -0.18, p < 0.001$ ) and gender ( $r = -0.12, p < 0.01$ ). These negative correlations suggested that older employees and tenure did not guarantee a higher leadership position (e.g. supervisor, manager). As predicted, all focal variables in this study were positively correlated with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.10 ( $p < 0.05$ ) to 0.27 ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that deviant work behaviours were significantly related. For more information please see [Table 1](#).

*Hypothesis testing using structural equation modelling (SEM).* Firstly, the measurement model of this study was examined using a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique, and the fit indices were evaluated against some cut-off scores ([Byrne, 2001](#); [Hu and Bentler, 1999](#); [Marsh and Balla, 1994](#)). Toxic leadership, turnover intention and CWB were three independent constructs. The hypothetical model proposed that toxic leadership could directly impact CWB or indirectly via the mediating role of turnover intention.

The results showed that the empirical data confirmed the proposed theoretical model ( $\chi^2/df = 2.20$ , RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.06, CFI = 0.91, and TLI = 90). In addition, each measure produced Average Variance Extracted (AVE) higher than 0.50 and discriminant validity coefficients (square root of AVE) of 0.63, 0.70, and 0.65 for toxic leadership, turnover intention, and CWB, respectively. The discriminant validity coefficients were higher than any correlation coefficient between variables indicating a valid measurement model ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). In order to reduce bias in the proposed theoretical model, the hypothesised model was tested against two alternative models. In the first alternative model, toxic leadership and turnover intention were combined as a single factor. In the second alternative model, all three measures were combined as a single measure. The results showed that the first and second alternative models yielded a poor fit. Please refer to the following [Table 2](#) for more details:

Model	No of factor	$\chi^2$	df	$p$	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
1	Hypothesised model <sup>a</sup>	1394.64	633	0.001	2.20	0.05	0.91	0.90
2	Alternative model one <sup>b</sup>	2671.79	664	0.001	4.02	0.08	0.78	0.75
3	Alternative model two <sup>c</sup>	3254.91	665	0.001	4.89	0.09	0.70	0.68

**Note(s):** <sup>a</sup>Three factors (toxic leadership predicts CWB partially via turnover intention)

<sup>b</sup>Two factors (toxic leadership and turnover intention in one factor predict CWB)

<sup>c</sup>One factor model (all three measures in a single factor)

**Table 2.** Model fit indices for the proposed hypothetical model and the two alternative models

Since the hypothesised model showed a better fit than the other alternative models, the next part of the hypothesis testing was to examine the path coefficient and the contribution of toxic leadership on CWB through turnover intention. Standardized estimates for the hypothesised model can be found in the following [Figure 1](#):

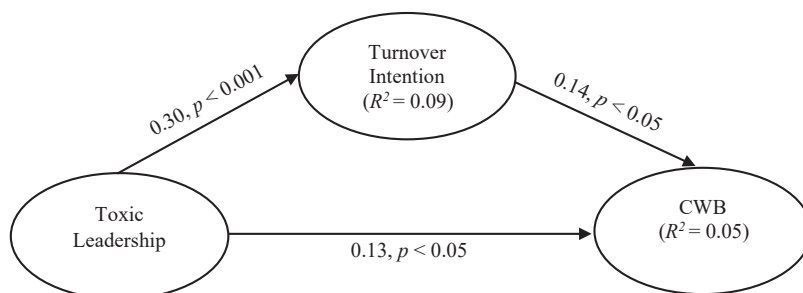
The standardised estimates showed the positive effect of toxic leadership on turnover intention (0.30,  $p < 0.001$ ) and CWB (0.13,  $p < 0.05$ ). Also, turnover intention positively predicted CWB (0.14,  $p < 0.05$ ). The partial mediating role of turnover intention was also confirmed as toxic leadership could directly impact CWB or indirectly through turnover intention. Toxic leadership accounted for a 9% variance in turnover intention, while the indirect effect of toxic leadership on CWB via turnover intention accounted for a 5% variance on CWB. Since toxic leadership directly impacted turnover intention and CWB, hypotheses 1a (Toxic Leadership positively influences employees' turnover intention) and 1b (toxic leadership positively influences employees' CWB) were confirmed. Also, hypothesis 2 (the impact of toxic leadership on CWB is mediated by turnover intention) was confirmed as the partial mediating role of turnover intention was confirmed.

### Discussion

In general, leadership in public organisations operates from the top government to leader-follower interactions at the individual level ([Clark et al., 2014](#)). Leadership at higher levels is influenced by policies and regulations set by the state and central government. However, the leader-member exchange at an individual level involves a psychological contract set by employees prior to joining the organisations ([Robinson and Rousseau, 1994](#)). In addition, the relational process is shaped by the mutual relationship between leaders and followers ([Hartley, 2018](#)). This study attracts our attention to the importance of leadership in dyadic relationships between leader and follower in public organisations. Leadership practices in public sectors should not only be viewed as a set of central government orders but rather as individual and social processes.

This study confirmed some previous findings regarding the effect of leaders' toxicity on employees' deviant behaviours ([Ahmad and Begum, 2020](#); [Aryee et al., 2007](#); [Kim et al., 2020](#); [Mawritz et al., 2012](#); [Mathieu and Babiak, 2016](#); [Pradhan et al., 2019a,b](#); [Richard et al., 2020](#)). The results found that the employees' turnover intention partially mediated the effect of toxic leadership on employees' CWB. The findings also provided new insight on how toxic leadership impacts employees' CWB in public service organisations, particularly for employees in a high power distance country like Indonesia.

This study supported the notion that the toxic leadership phenomena widely occurred across various organisation types (e.g. public vs private) and cultures (e.g. high vs low power distance). Toxic leadership could have been a universal phenomenon, and it had a destructive impact on both employees and the organisation. Although public service organisations are



**Figure 1.** Empirical model of the effect of toxic leadership on CWB via turnover intention



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distinct from other organisations, public organisations share some common features with their business counterparts. People in public sectors appear to show similar responses to psychological contract breaches. Leaders who display hostile and unfair behaviours have breached relational obligations (Rousseau, 1989). High power distance orientation in Indonesia public sectors has influenced how people react and accept power imbalance. Some employees who experience toxic leadership withhold their intention to confront their leaders because their behaviours could be perceived as intolerance to the acceptable norms in the organisation.

Public sector employees in Indonesian culture may hesitate to display retaliatory behaviours towards their toxic leaders (Richard *et al.*, 2020). However, the mistreatments from their leaders are perceived as a breach of mutual obligations perpetrated by the employer. Thus, employees develop an intention to leave the organisation or reduce their efforts to perform the tasks. In a worst-case scenario, their intention to leave the organisation and effort reduction can turn into more counterproductive behaviours such as silence (Lam and Xu, 2019), knowledge hiding (Pradhan *et al.*, 2019; Shah and Saeed Hashmi, 2019), work withdrawal, production deviance, and theft (Wei and Si, 2013b). They might withhold intention to confront the perpetrator, but their intention to leave the organisation could increase. Employees who have high turnover intention will be more likely to commit CWB.

Scholars and practitioners should also scrutinise how leaders exert their power in public sectors. Abuse of power could trigger toxic leadership, and it might lead to counterproductive behaviours. This study has exemplified how toxic leadership increased negative behaviours such as turnover intention and CWB in Indonesia. In the worst-case scenario, Indonesian public sectors might unwittingly suffer from severe CWB if their employees had a high toxic leadership and turnover intention. The abused employees might remain in the organisations even though they received unfair treatment. However, their intention to quit would increase retaliation against their leaders or even the organisations. These employees could be less productive and show CWB. On the contrary, when constructive supports from the organisation takes place, employees will perceive more mutual relationships between leader and followers and their psychological contracts are fulfilled (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway, 2005).

*Practical implications.* This study proposed three practical implications. Firstly, public organisations in Indonesia should be aware of the unseen mechanism on how toxic leadership unwittingly harms employees' mental health and increases CWB. Public organisations should implement some strategies to reduce the emergence of toxic behaviours. For example, a public organisation may design a support system for employees (Li *et al.*, 2016) or strengthen employees' positive psychological states (Harvey *et al.*, 2007).

Secondly, leadership involves many elements within an organisational context. In public sectors, leadership is shaped throughout different hierarchical levels, starting from the central government, local government, and finally leader-follower social interactions. Although this study found only small effect sizes of toxic leadership, the consequences could be detrimental to leader-follower social interactions. Toxic leadership occurs at the lowest level of interaction which is based on leader-follower daily interactions. This part of leadership practice should receive more attention in public organisation studies and practices. The negative leader behaviours still receive less attention, while the cost of these behaviours is considerably high for the public organisation. Indonesian public organisations should perform some systematic evaluation on how leadership is practised at lower levels within a workplace.

Lastly, the psychological contract breach might have a trickle-down effect in public organisations. For example, Wei and Si (2013a) found that leaders who experienced a psychological contract breach would be more likely to increase their abusive behaviours towards their subordinates. Although psychological contract depends on employees' subjective evaluation, the organisation should prevent leaders from breaching employees' psychological contracts.

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*Limitations and future research directions.* This study has found a mechanism of how toxic leadership influences employees' CWB by employing a psychological contract theory. However, there are two limitations that have been identified in this study. Firstly, the effect size was considerably small for the direct and indirect effect of toxic leadership, and researchers are aware that followers' characteristics greatly influence leaders' behaviour. However, a small fraction of toxic behaviours could cause many undesired outcomes in the long run. There could be other factors that might magnify the small effect size of the toxic leadership in public organisations (see [Funder and Ozer, 2019](#)), including subordinate's attribution style ([Martinko et al., 2011](#)) and personality traits ([Mawritz et al., 2014](#)). Future studies should further investigate how other factors influence the effect of toxic leadership on employees' outcomes.

Lastly, this study proposed that power distance orientation within the Indonesian public organisations influenced how employees reacted to toxic leadership. This particular cultural value could also interact with other cultural dimensions, such as individualism vs collectivism. Furthermore, organisational context also can influence how employees in a high power distance country tolerate a leader's aggressive behaviours. For example, a high-performance climate determined how employees responded to abusive supervision ([Xu et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, future studies should investigate how culture and organisational climate influence the effect of toxic leadership on employee outcomes.

## Conclusion

Although the negative outcomes of toxic leadership were consistent across studies, the mechanism in which toxic leadership triggers employees' deviant behaviours might vary across cultures and organisations. As proposed by this study, tolerance to power imbalance halt subordinates from displaying retaliatory behaviours towards their leaders. However, as the psychological contract was breached, their intention to leave the organisation also increased. The employees might hesitate to display anger or aggressive behaviours, but they are urged to cope with the mistreatment. During this circumstance, employees in public service organisations could reduce their efforts and performance and eventually engage in CWB. Public organisations in Indonesia should consider some avenues to tackle the destructive effect of toxic leadership within the organisations. In public sectors, some systematic approaches should be implemented at social level interactions to ensure the fulfilment of psychological contracts and to mitigate the trickle-down effect of toxic leadership.

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