

Transforming Organizational Culture: From Toxicity to Positivity through Positive Psychology

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Abstract: Toxic organizational cultures, characterized by poor communication, distrust, and unethical leadership, present a pervasive global challenge, severely undermining employee well-being, engagement, and organizational sustainability. Despite widespread recognition of these detrimental effects, a significant gap remains in understanding systematic approaches to transform such environments. This concept paper addresses this gap by proposing Psychological Capital (PsyCap) as a transformative framework for counteracting workplace toxicity and fostering a positive organizational culture. Through a synthesis of existing empirical and theoretical literature, this paper examines the defining characteristics and costs of toxic cultures and contrasts them with the principles of positive psychology. The research establishes that by cultivating the four components of PsyCap, organizations can systematically build collective resilience, enhance employee agency, and promote a forward-looking, optimistic mindset. The study underscores the need for further empirical research to validate the proposed conceptual framework and provides practical implications for leaders and organizations seeking sustainable cultural transformation.

Keywords: Organisational culture, Toxicity, Positivity, Positive psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational culture plays a crucial role in shaping workplace dynamics, influencing employee behavior, performance, and overall organizational success (Sanusi, Suwarsi, & Perkasa, 2025). In recent years, the growing prevalence of toxic workplace cultures have raised global concern among researchers and practitioners, as such environments are closely linked to decreased employee well-being, low engagement, and declining productivity. Toxic cultures, characterized by poor communication, distrust, bullying, and unethical leadership practices, have been found to create significant psychological and physical distress among employees, thereby undermining both individual and organizational sustainability (Anjum *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2020). The economic and human costs associated with workplace toxicity are substantial, with studies reporting widespread negative impacts on mental health, morale, and productivity across industries worldwide (SHRM, 2019; Heather & MacArthur, 2024).

Positive psychology emphasizes the importance of fostering positive emotions, strengths, and relationships in building flourishing individuals and institutions (Goel & Wani, 2024). Within organizational contexts, concepts such as Psychological Capital (PsyCap), which encompasses hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, have gained recognition for their ability to enhance employee engagement, satisfaction, and performance (Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

Integrating these principles into organizational strategies not only mitigates the damaging effects of toxic behaviors, but also lays the foundation for sustainable, high-performing, and human-centered workplaces.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the literature on how positive psychology, particularly through constructs like PsyCap, can serve as a transformative approach to counteract toxic organizational cultures. By synthesizing existing literature on both toxicity and positivity in organizational contexts, the research seeks to contribute a conceptual understanding of how positive psychological interventions of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO) can be ultimately transforming toxic workplaces into environments that promote human flourishing and organizational success.

Problem statement

Toxic organizational cultures, marked by behaviors such as poor communication, lack of trust, and unethical practices, significantly undermine employee well-being, satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness (Hamza & Hassan, 2019). Empirical studies have shown that toxic organizational cultures increase psychological distress, disengagement, and turnover, and foster ineffective work behaviors and low organizational commitment, ultimately risking the long-term sustainability and reputation of organizations (Anjum *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2020;

Tambunan, et al., 2024; Al-Hassani, 2025; Hassan, Ali & Imran, 2024). Research done by Anjum et al (2018), shows that toxic dimension such as ostracism, incivility, harassment, and bullying have direct negative and significant effects on job productivity of employees. These researchers suggested that organizations need to eradicate the factors of toxic workplace environments to ensure their prosperity and success (Anjum et al., 2018). Zilong Wang et al (2020), studied the relationships between toxic workplace environment, workplace stress, and project success. The result of this study revealed that toxic workplace environments have a negative effect on the project's success and workers consequently endure mental and physical issues (Wang et al., 2020). Tambunan, et al (2024), proved that a toxic work environment leads to a decline in employee engagement, which thus lowers overall performance and productivity of the employees, thereby posing a significant threat to the company's success. Their study, conducted with a sample of 600 employees from the coal mining industry, revealed a clear link between workplace toxicity and decreased levels of engagement among workers (Tambunan et al., 2024). The toxic behavior of a leader also creates a toxic and stressful working environment, leading to higher levels of employee burnout and increased job-related stress (Al-Hassani, 2025). A study done in Iraq revealed that toxic leadership does exert direct and indirect negative influences on organizational commitment through job stress, suggesting the promotion of a healthy and supportive work environment for organizational success (Al-Hassani, 2025).

Data from various global studies indicate that toxic work environments are a widespread issue, affecting a significant majority of employees worldwide and resulting in major costs related to mental health, productivity loss, and high turnover. According to the APA's 2024 'Work in America survey', 15 percent of participants described their workplace as somewhat or very toxic. The findings also revealed that nearly 59 percent of employees believe their employers overestimate the mental health of their work environment, while about 39 percent expressed concern that disclosing a mental health condition at work could negatively affect them (Heather & MacArthur, 2024). According to SHRM report, bad work cultures has cost American businesses \$223 billion over the last five years (SHRM, 2019). According to the 2023 Toxic Workplace Report, out of a pool of more than 2,000 employees from various industries, a

remarkable 75% indicated they had encountered a toxic workplace culture. Moreover, 87% of these employees said that experiencing such a culture had a negative impact on their mental health. Data from other parts of the world also shows that toxic work culture reduce the productivity of the organization. In Indonesia, between 2020 and 2022, the proportion of employees contemplating a job change increased by 10% annually, and the rate of actual resignations nearly doubled in 2022, predominantly due to work-related mental health problems (Sari & Dudija, 2024).

These reports highlight the critical importance of organizations building a positive work culture to ensure long-term success and wellbeing for both the company and its employees (Hassan, 2024). A supportive and inclusive work culture not only enhances employee satisfaction and engagement, but also drives productivity, loyalty, and overall organizational performance (Anjum et al., 2018).

Although substantial evidence exists regarding the harmful effects of toxic workplace cultures, many organizations continue to face significant obstacles in eliminating toxicity or successfully shifting toward a more positive culture (Appelbaum, & Roy-Girard, 2007; George, 2023). Various organizations are adopting psychological resources to transform the organization to a positive organization (Grande, 2021). The HERO model, derived from the principles of PsyCap (Psychological Capital), is a relatively recent framework for organizational transformation. It adopts a holistic, global approach, emphasizing that organizations fostering employee well-being, maintaining healthy resources, and promoting positive workplace practices become more resilient, empowered, and capable of thriving sustainably (Salanova et al., 2016).

There is a limited empirical understanding of how principles of positive psychology can systematically shift cultural norms from toxicity toward positivity and long-term flourishing. Lack of such understanding creates a crucial research gap within organizational studies. Therefore, there is a pressing need to examine how the integration of positive psychological interventions such as PsyCap can serve as a practical and sustainable strategy for cultural transformation in organizations, fostering environments that enhance employee morale, collaboration, and organizational performance.

Research Objectives

The research of objectives of this literature review are as follows:

- To examine the defining characteristics, causes, and manifestations of toxic organizational cultures.
- To examine the characteristics of a positive organizational culture and how a positive culture can enhance organizational outcome.
- To explore and synthesize the role and applicability of positive psychology principles, particularly Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in counteracting workplace toxicity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Key Concepts

Positive Organizational Culture

Peter Drucker once said that “culture eats strategy for breakfast”, which evidently describes the power of culture in an organization (Li, & Melin, 2023). The meaning of the phrase is no matter how well-designed the organizational strategies are, it will fail if the organization’s values and behaviors don't support it (Li, & Melin, 2023). Therefore, the importance of creating a positive culture in an organization is well supported in this phrase itself. There are pockets of consensus on the definition of organizational culture. However, a clear operational definition of a ‘positive organizational culture’ detailing its specific components and characteristics is still lacking (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). According to Meyerson and Martin (1987), in the organizational context, culture is defined as the signs and symbols, shared practices, and underlying assumptions of an organization. Similarly, Hattangadi (2017), viewed organizational culture as a collective framework that provides a shared system of values, beliefs, and assumptions that dictate acceptable thought and behaviors of the people in the organization. Organizational culture also provides a blueprint on how the organization functions, outlining expected behaviors, decision-making norms, and the values that guide collective action (Neong, Isa, & Manaf, 2022).

Given that, organizational culture is the shared values and assumptions practiced by employees, creating a positive culture in the organization is very important for building a successful organization. In management literature, culture is a key driver of organizational success, fostering innovation, strengthening employee commitment, and enhancing job satisfaction (Schein, 2010). A positive organizational culture promotes unity and

purpose among employees, consistently supports and trusts the employees, enhances open communication and helps teams to achieve their maximum potential (Ghaleb & Dahiam, 2024). When these positive behaviors and attributes are integrated into the organizational policies and procedures, they promote a supportive work environment and allow employees to thrive and grow (Ghaleb & Dahiam, 2024). Oftentimes leaders are the ones who influence positive behaviors in the organization; they guide and help employees to abide by the policies, procedures, accepted communication channels and create bonds among employees (Neong *et al.*, 2022)

With the given literature, a positive organizational culture can be defined as values and beliefs exhibited by the employees to create a positive work culture that ensures effective communication, promotes creativity and supports employees to achieve their full potential.

Toxic Organizational Culture

Anjum *et al* (2018), compared toxic culture with cancer, stating that, like cancer, it damages all the stakeholders of an organization as it creates toxic culture, toxic leaders, and toxic employees, which eventually create a toxic organization. Similarly, Sari & Dudija (2024), stated that a toxic organizational culture is formed with the combination of toxic leaders, easily influenced followers, and a conducive environment.

There are several elements which contribute to the emergence of organizational toxicity (Tambuan *et al.*, 2024; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012). A toxic organizational culture is an environment where leadership is ineffective, communication is inadequate, excessive competition among employees, employees are micromanaged, expectations are unclear, favoritism is common, change is resisted, and bullying is normalized. Additionally, narcissistic and aggressive leadership, threatening behaviors from managers or coworkers, harassment, bullying, ostracism, and overreliance on technology also included as some of the behaviors likely ingrained in a toxic culture (Sari & Dudija, 2024). These characteristic can be visible in an organizational culture as a result of persistent organizational dynamics and patterns that exert their influence or except these behaviors over an extended period of time (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012).

According to Gilbert *et al* (2012), when employees work in a toxic environment, they often transmit

negative energy to their coworkers. Eventually, the toxicity significantly influences employees and have repercussions that extend into their mental and physical health (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010). Appelbaum, & Roy-Girard (2007), stated that toxic behaviors embedded in the workplace culture negatively affect employee well-being, leading to physical and psychological imbalances that cause increased stress and fatigue. Emotional and physical exhaustion may result in diminishing job satisfaction and organizational commitment among employees, which can subsequently increase the turnover rate and reduce their job performance (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2024).

The effects of toxic work culture reaches beyond individual employee well-being and infiltrates the entire organizational structure, impacting overall performance, morale, and sustainability of the organization (Taghikilani, 2024). It also fosters a climate of fear, which hinders creative thinking and reduces organizational effectiveness. Moreover, toxic culture hinders organizational goals by increasing turnover and absenteeism, decreasing productivity and innovation, damaging the company's reputation and causing significant financial loss Taghikilani, (2024).

Based on the literature, toxic culture can be defined as a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by negative organizational behaviors that will impact overall organizational performance.

Positive Psychology

According to Gable & Haidt (2005), positive psychology is a growing field within psychology that focuses on understanding and promoting well-being, optimal functioning and flourishing of people, groups, and institutions. Positive psychology focuses on exploring the brighter aspects of human life, such as experiences of joy, acts of compassion, and the development of nurturing families and communities, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the human experience (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Phan *et al.*, 2020). Park et al (2016) described positive psychology as a positive mental states such as happiness, personal qualities like strengths, talents, and interests, as well as supportive relationships and positive institutions. According to Sheldon et al. (2000 cited in Phan *et al.*, 2020), "Positive Psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning. It aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive. The positive psychology

movement represents a new commitment on the part of research psychologists to focus attention upon the resources of psychological health, thereby going beyond prior emphases upon disease and disorder".

The pioneer theorists of positive psychology, which are Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), emphasized the importance of shifting focus from solely repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities. These scholars described positive psychology at three levels-subjective, individually, and institutional. At the subjective level it focuses on positive feelings like well-being, contentment, and satisfaction; future-oriented states like hope and optimism; and present-moment experiences like happiness and flow (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the individual level, it is concerned with enduring personal strengths and virtues that contribute to a good life. These traits include the ability to love and work, courage, social skills, an appreciation for beauty, perseverance, forgiveness, creativity, future-mindedness, spirituality, talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that encourage them. These virtues include responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, tolerance, a strong work ethic, and moderation (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Thus positive psychology is gaining momentum in the organizational context. Researchers in this field are addressing the gap in literature by examining how individuals' positive traits affect employee performance and organizational productivity, and by applying these insights to shape organizational policies (Rivera, Gálvez-Mozo, & Tirado-Serrano, 2024). Positive psychology provides opportunities to improve satisfaction, motivation, and productivity within the workplace. Wiegand and Geller (2004) suggest several methods to strengthen individuals' orientation toward success and highlight the actively caring model as an effective way to illustrate key elements of a positive and supportive work environment. These include workplace resilience, comparisons between authoritarian and authoritative leadership styles, the creation of motivating work environments, the pursuit of personal bests, staff morale, flow experiences at work, the importance individuals assign to tasks and outcomes, and the pivotal role of relationships in overall performance (Martin, 2005).

To come to a consensus, positive psychological traits create a positive work culture where individuals feel supported and motivated, leading to better performance and satisfaction for both employees and organizations.

Theoretical Proposition

For much of the 20th century, research on organizational behavior was often problem-centric, focusing on issues like employee burnout, conflict resolution, and corrective discipline. This deficit-based approach viewed the workplace through a lens of pathology, seeking primarily to identify and fix what was broken (Phan et al 2020). This traditional pathology model began to change with the emergence of positive psychology. In a landmark special issue of *American Psychologist*, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), criticized the discipline’s almost exclusive emphasis on weakness, damage, and remediation, and issued a compelling call to study human strengths, flourishing, and optimal functioning instead. Their vision propelled positive psychology as a formal field and soon inspired its application to organizational settings, most notably through Fred Luthans and colleagues, who systematically introduced positive psychological principles into the study of work and management (Luthans, 2002; Luthans et al., 2015). This marked a fundamental paradigm shift from merely fixing what is wrong to proactively developing what is strong in people and organizations.

Luthans’ (2002) framework of Positive Organizational Behavior (POB), defined as “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). The terms *psychological capital* and *positive psychological capital* are used interchangeably in the literature. Psychological capital (PsyCap) is defined as an individual’s positive psychological state of development characterized by the four core components that together form the HERO framework: Self-efficacy (confidence to take on and succeed in challenging tasks), hope (perseverance toward goals and the ability to redirect paths when necessary), optimism (a positive explanatory style about succeeding now and in the future), and resilience (the capacity to bounce back and even thrive when faced with adversity).

Thus, the HERO model provides a structured way to conceptualize positive organizational culture as a set of planned, proactive strategies that promote thriving at both individual and collective levels.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the problem discussion and research literature, the formulated conceptual model is as follows.

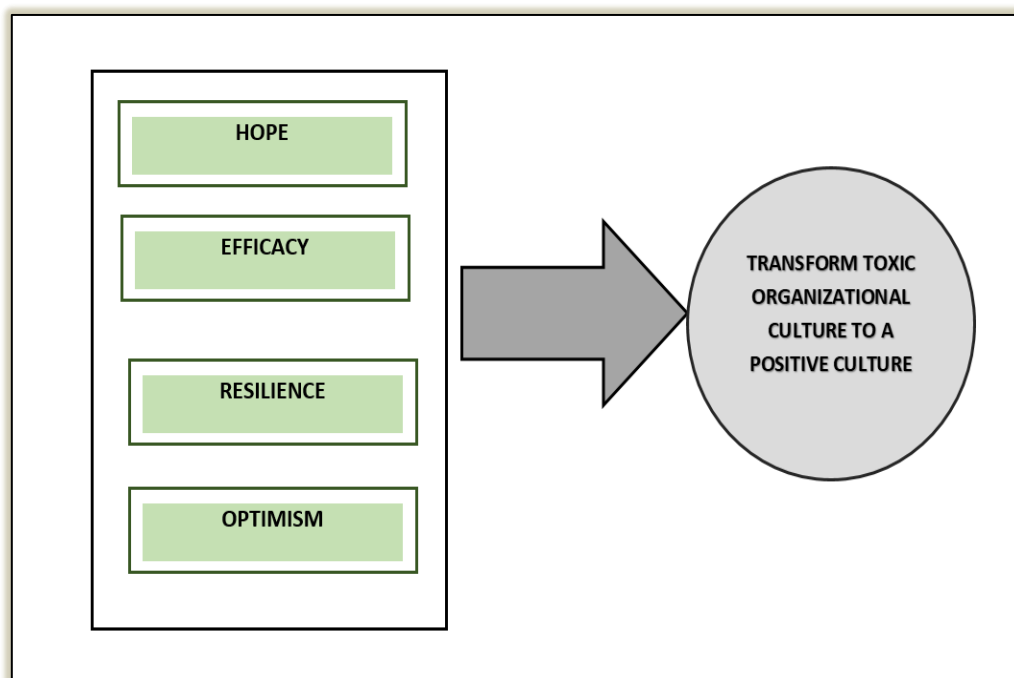


Figure-1: Conceptual Framework of Transforming Organizational Culture: From Toxicity to Positivity through Psychological Capital

In this paper, the conceptual framework is developed based on the framework of Psychological Capital which encompassed by four psychological states of confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans, 2012).

P1: Through hope, transform organizational culture from toxicity to positivity

Hope, a core element of psychological capital, involves both the desire for positive outcomes and confidence in one's ability to attain those (Gallagher *et al.*, 2025). According to Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2021), people with high levels of hope tend to set more challenging and ambitious goals while displaying greater perseverance and agency when confronting obstacles. Similarly, Gallagher and Lopez (2022) emphasize that hope provides a cognitive structure that enables individuals to imagine successful future scenarios and to develop practical, actionable pathways toward those goals. This mental framework strengthens goal setting, improves planning, and enhances problem-solving effectiveness in the face of difficulties (Goel & Wani, 2024). Hope is also a cumulative experience generated by the dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between the motivation to act and the identification of methods to achieve goals (Goel & Wani, 2024). The psychological principles of hope can be leveraged to mitigate the negative outcomes of a toxic work environment, including staff disengagement, burnout, and high turnover rates. When institutionalized as a tool for providing robust support and establishing visionary long-term goals, hope can transform and revitalize organizational culture (Akinwalere, Chang, & Barbhuiya, 2025).

P2: Through self-efficacy, transform organizational culture from toxicity to positivity

Self-efficacy is characterized as a person's drive and optimistic mental condition of growth. Self-efficacy mirrors a strong conviction that a person is capable of executing new or complex tasks, or handling obstacles (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Self-efficacy includes three aspects: magnitude, referring to a person's conviction regarding the level of task difficulty they can attain; strength, indicating the robustness of their belief in their magnitude; and generality, which is the extent to which their confidence in their skills is applicable across various contexts (Nwanzu & Babalola, 2019; (Suthari & Manam, 2025)).

To counteract a toxic work environment, employees can cultivate self-efficacy to effectively navigate challenges, criticism, and the detrimental

behaviors of colleagues. Self-efficacy can function as a form of psychological resilience, creating a buffer that prevents the negative culture from eroding morale and causing burnout. Ultimately, this empowered mindset fosters the optimism and proactive energy necessary to build a more positive and sustainable organizational culture.

P3: Through resilience, transform organizational culture from toxicity to positivity

Resilience is the significant human capacity to recover from challenges and transformations. (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). More than just returning to a pre-crisis state, this process of "bouncing back" frequently results in enhanced personal growth for individuals and communities (Luthans *et al.*, 2004). Resilience, a key aspect of mental capital, represents the remarkable capacity to navigate challenging situations, adversities, and hurdles with adaptability and growth. As Goel & Wani (2024) stated, people with greater resilience were less prone to burnout, even when working in highly stressful settings. Resilience is essential for preserving good mental health and general wellness, particularly during times of crisis and instability (Goel & Wani 2024).

Organizational culture can be reshaped through resilience by focusing on enhancing leadership skills, emotional awareness, transparent communication, acknowledgement and incentives, work-life harmony efforts, diversity and inclusion projects, conflict management education, and ongoing growth and development.

P4: Through optimism, transform organizational culture from toxicity to positivity

Optimism is a key mental attribute that greatly affects a person's existence. It enables people to manage their behaviors, while pessimism encourages sentiments of powerlessness (Kour, El-Den, & Sriratanaviriyakul, 2019). Optimism is also described as the inclination to link favorable internal occurrences to lasting and widespread factors, while connecting unfavorable external happenings to short-lived and particular situations (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). The capacity for optimism can be cultivated through established methods, specifically by practicing forgiveness for past events, gratitude for the present, and a forward-looking orientation that seeks out future opportunities (Krishna & Sivakumar, 2023). In a toxic environment, optimism doesn't mean accepting the toxic behaviors of others, but rather it is a method that can be effectively used to

promote psychological safety, open communication, innovation, trust, and motivation. Optimism also can be used to mitigate negative relationships between job stressors and burnout (Olgun & Thapa, 2025). Optimism also helps to practice realistic optimism by balancing a positive mindset with acknowledging and processing negative feelings, setting strong personal boundaries, and building a supportive network outside the immediate toxic environment (Krishna & Sivakumar, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study highlight that applying the PsyCap-based HERO model offers a powerful framework for flourishing organizational culture, presenting significant implications for both theory and future research in positive organizational scholarship.

Theoretical Implications: Theoretically, this study underscores the critical need for both quantitative and qualitative studies to empirically validate the proposed framework and explore its underlying mechanisms to bring a more robust ways to transform the organizational culture.

Practical Implications: From a practical standpoint, this literature review has provided clear evidence of the HERO model as a viable intervention for countering toxicity and building a healthier, more resilient workplace. Its successful adoption, however, depends on its deep integration into corporate core values and daily operations, a process that must be championed by senior leadership and systematically cascaded down through all organizational levels.

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