Some like it toxic! Exploring leadership and its impact on startup culture

By ODA Team

About ODA

We are passionate about supporting individuals and organizations that strive for continual growth and excellence. Our work is embedded in the philosophical foundations of being appreciative, holistic, and interconnected to the whole. These philosophical foundations are built into the DNA of everything we undertake, whether designing an intervention, writing in a publication, or doing a keynote speech.

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Toxicity in budding organizations such as startups has been the centre of attention in recent times. Several disgruntled employees have come out on social media to express their horror tales taking the corporate world by surprise, and subsequent acceptance of the nature of startups. This compels the question, what makes startups toxic? What may attribute to such a culture? What may be the way forward? This paper attempts to answer these compelling questions so that our fraternity can be cognizant of the reasons and find a way to mitigate these issues.

Anil was not happy with his sales job in the startup he had joined 3 months ago. His manager Prakash, who was brimming with chutzpah with an air of authority, yielded low confidence in Anil. Prakash was from a premier institute in India and he had the pay that Anil could only dream of. After all, Anil was just a graduate from just another engineering college. Anil thought, that joining the startup would enable him to learn the ropes early in his career. But the scenario was far from what he had expected. Each day was marked with anxiety. Probably, it was the way his manager spoke to him, Anil thought. The tone seemed aggressive and condescending. Expletives were a daily occurrence. This led Anil to believe he was performing poorly even when he gave his best. At the end of the day, he was left doubting his capabilities. There were long working hours and too many targets, and on top of that, his manager was hell-bent on micromanaging. As a sales associate, there was constant pressure that he might get fired without notice just like his colleagues were. Other teams were no different. But what got Anil thinking was, why did the managers choose to yell and call people names? Why was the organization silent about this?

The downside of toxicity and what does it look like?

In a study conducted by SHRM, it was found that the cost of turnover was estimated at $223 billion over 5 years and this was attributed to toxic work culture (Mirza, 2019). An MIT Sloan Management Review study suggests that corporate culture is a reliable predictor when it comes to turnover and is ten times more powerful as an indicator when compared with compensation (Sull et al., 2022). In recent times, there are an overwhelming number of articles that suggest startups exhibit a toxic culture (Lalwani, 2021; Sharma Punit & Sushma, 2018). This has also been corroborated by Glassdoor reviews, Linkedin posts, and YouTube videos voicing the same.

The cost of replacing an employee can shoot above two times the annual salary of the employee (McFeely and Wigert, 2019). According to the study by SHRM, toxic work culture caused absenteeism. Indicators of negative work cultures were harassment and discrimination. 3 out of 10 employees had reported that their managers did not promote a culture of open and honest communication. 1 in 4 people did not feel safe voicing their work-related concerns. They also did not feel respected and valued at work. In a Gallup study, it was found that 52% of the employees who left the organization at their will stated that their exit could have been prevented by the organization and their managers (McFeely and Wigert, 2019). These phenomena can be understood by a study that has found that humans reacted more strongly to negative stimuli than to positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). These stimuli are said to threaten their existence in the workplace. We collected qualitative data which we kept anonymous for this study due to the sensitive nature of the subject.. One employee mentioned,

"Trying to call people early that we will start the day at 10 AM. Keep reducing the starting time but never do they mention the leaving time from office Even if you complete your work, you still have to stay back till 7 to 8 PM"

Another employee quoted,

"While trusting the senior management like us is good, not trusting the entry and mid level folks and tracking (read surveiling) them goes against the basic tenets of any business: "Trusting your employees".

When asked about why the employee was disgruntled, it was stated, "micro managing every task that you have been assigned". An employee who had quit the startup mentioned the following when asked the reason for the exit,

"No work life balance. Poor allocation of resources leading to cascading blocking of calendars even in late nights regularly for 3 months".

These are only some of the many quotes that we gathered for the study. This goes to show how deep the cracks are.

According to a study by Forbes, hustle culture is one of the reasons why toxicity breeds in an organization (Kurter, 2021). A toxic environment is marked by hostility, strong ingroups, mistrust, poor communication, and gossip. These symptoms indicate fear and manipulation which are rife within the organization. Unhappy employees are quick to leave their jobs in the current world as evidenced by the Great Resignation. In this type of culture, the deadline is always "yesterday" and it inculcates a sense of urgency which eventually result in burnout. Employees also exit when the blame game is prevalent in the workplace. Failures seem to have serious consequences and the environment is unsafe for the employees to admit the mistakes and learn from them. The lack of a safe environment is also caused by an authoritative culture where employees are afraid to voice their opinions and where honesty is punished. In these organizations, trust bonds are broken due to the dog-eat-dog climate. This type of culture also promotes cliques and favouritism depending on who is closer to the authoritative figure.

The top leadership focuses/ focused on creating a positive culture in the startup. — 2.30

There is/ was work-life balance in the startup. — 2.00

My personal boundaries are/ were protected in the startup. — 2.09

There are/ were steep dead-lines that created stress in me. — 2.78

I can/ could depend on my colleagues during a crisis. — 2.39

Mental health is/ was acknowledged in the startup. — 1.39

To summarise, some indicators of toxic culture (Kurter, 2021; Liu, 2022; Sull et al., 2022) are:

* Low morale
* Organization-wide lack of enthusiasm
* Non-inclusive behaviour
* Strong cliques
* Lack of clarity
* Disrespect
* Interpersonal drama
* Unethical behaviour
* Blame culture
* Bullying, harassment, and hostility
* Cutthroat behaviour
* Fear of failure
* Fear of losing out on promotion or job due to honesty
* High attrition rate

Benefits of a positive workplace culture

It has been supported that a toxic workplace environment has a negative association with project success and workplace stress (Wang et al., 2020). The association between a toxic office environment and occupational stress is moderated by organisational support, which contributes to the project's success. Hence, intervention and support are key to shaping to the workplace environment.

Research suggests that when there are positive practices in place, employees tend to remain with the organization (Cameron et al., 2011).

Organizations with positive practices experience greater effective relationships between the employees and the management. Positive practices are also key indicators of organizational effectiveness as measured by financial performance. According to an employee who is a senior leader at an e-commerce company and formerly associated with a few renowned startups in India,

"Trite as it may sound, a positive work culture that focuses on employee well-being, job stability and meritocracy fosters ownership, risk appetite, integrity and excellence at work. As someone whose last 2 companies were unicorns which chose diametrically opposite work cultures as leitmotifs to drive their employees towards quick results, I have been truly privileged to witness and learn from both the best and worst workplaces over the past 6 years. A start-up with a positive work culture steered through carefully calibrated employee happiness and growth measures is likely to drive quick and sustainable results as the employees not only go out of their way to take calculated risks but also own the output even if it turns out to be a massive failure. However a start-up that deploys overtly controlling and punitive measures in addition to a loosely driven 'hire and fire' policy may not be able to sustain its quick wins in the long run as fear and punishment which push an employee towards excellence for a month or two is unlikely to motivate him/her forever towards continuous excellence; massive attrition - organic & inorganic - including but not limited to many ed & fin-tech startups bear testimony to this".

Moreover, research suggests that teams that improve their practices over time outperform other units which do not (Cameron et al., 2011). When members of an organization observe compassion, feel gratitude, and feel forgiveness, a cycle of mutual strengthening begins. Staw & Barsade (1993) found that positive emotions lead to improved cognitive function, improved decision-making, and more effective interpersonal relationships among employees. Positive practices also protect employees from psychological distress and dysfunctional behaviour (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Based on the heliotropic effect lens, it has been found that organizations that have positive practices produce elevated performance (Cameron, 2008).

What does a positive workplace culture look like?

Positive workplace culture is one that prioritizes employee well-being, provides support at all levels within the organization, and has a policy of promoting respect, trust, empathy, and support. It can majorly consist of six key elements (Cameron et al., 2011).

They are:

1 Caring for employees

2 Forgiving mistakes and not assigning blame

3 Work towards a heliotropic culture where inspiring others is a norm

4 Being compassionate towards colleagues in times of crisis (Dutton et al., 2014)

5 Priortizing respect and trust along with gratitude and integrity

6 Exploring meaningful aspects of work

Lack of toxicity promotes health, reduces turnover, increases loyalty and reduces negative behaviours, and improves performance across the organization.

Reasons for toxicity

Environment

Wang et al. (2020) found that workplace support moderates the relationship between workplace environment and stress. This means, that to shape the environment within the organization conscious efforts towards positive change are likely to have a positive impact on culture.

However, it is also important to realise that many a time, organizations are coping with external pressure which in turn creates a sense of urgency and an exploitative culture within the organization. This may be perpetuated by the nature of the leadership and their personalities. Nevertheless, certain external situations may act as triggers that can derail the leaders. This understanding may be beneficial since it can help leaders realise under which conditions they are likely to derail and influence their organizational culture negatively. There have been articles by Harvard Business Review that describe how Venture Capital (VC) funding can be detrimental to startups (Mullins, 2014). VCs may pressurise startups to prematurely scale and this might produce detrimental results (Paley, 2017). According to YCombinator, startups are forced to burn too fast in order to keep VCs interested and attract more funds (Harris, 2016). A recent article mentioned Sequoia Capital warning the startups to focus on consistent growth and profitability, reduce costs, and practise disciplined financial management since attracting capital will be tougher in the current environment (Patwardhan, 2022). The lack of financial munificence in the environment is likely to put further strain on the startups thereby impacting organizational culture and only time can tell its tale.

When asked about the reasons what caused a negative culture, we received some insights which were kept anonymous due to sensitive nature of the study. One employee gave the following reasons,

"Riding the hyper growth bandwagon during favorable market situations only to totally dismantle/ wind up new businesses under VC pressure during tepid market environment.

Lack of long term thinking esp w.r.to profitability. But, this is a bigger problem that plagues most if not all tech startups".

There is VC pressure on the leadership.
2.96
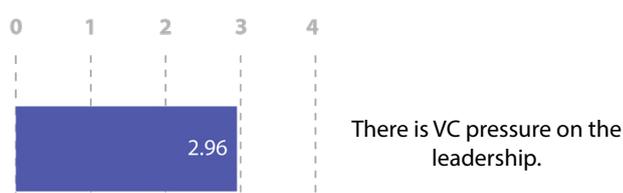
Leaders

Triggered by environmental pressure, the leaders may focus entirely on meeting goals rather than building a sustainable culture. Let us consider this about Indian leaders in startups – most of the leaders in startups have stellar academic performances but may have little life experience. This may imply that adequate leadership skills that are built due to life events and their consequent realizations are absent. These leaders have typically been those who have focused on their short-term achievements such as cracking tough exams, achieving excellent grades, coveting the best jobs, and so on. In B-Schools, possibly individuals without work experience may not appreciate courses like Organizational Behaviour which may seem alien and unnecessary to them at that point of time.

One may question, what makes the leaders choose that kind of pressure? Is it the inherent and practised need to achieve under pressure that makes them susceptible to such situations? Do lofty goals appeal to their nature?

According to a senior HR Business Partner with more than 10 years of experience in startups,

"An empathetic leader almost automatically attracts empathetic people around him. A narcissist on the other hand ensures that empathy is the last thing you can have in mind. Culture is top-driven whether we like it or not.

Examples of how culture percolates down the line can be seen in the behaviour exhibited by the next chain of command. A narcissist almost eerily seems to be living through his leaders – one seems to experience clones replicating the behaviour displayed at the top".
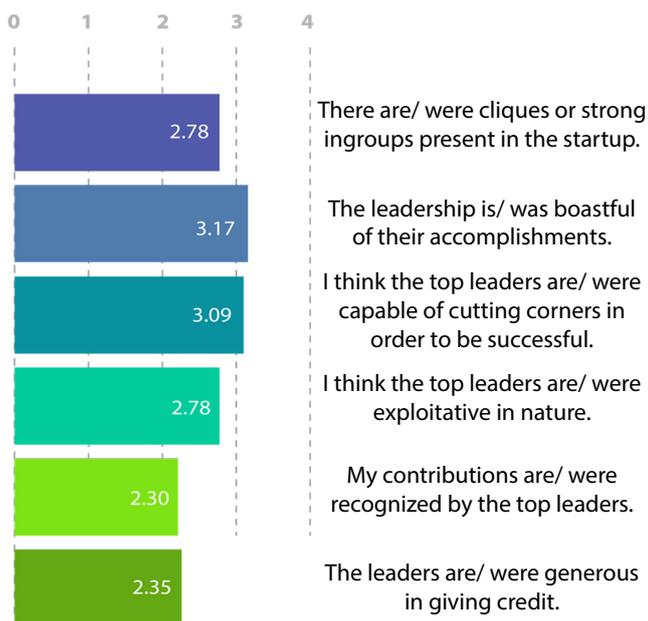
It has been claimed that for a person to be successful, the presence of the Dark Triad is helpful. Research suggests that the Dark Triad is present in most leaders to remain successful, especially in short term (Furham et al., 2013). It has also been suggested that leaders who have an unclear sense of self are more susceptible to the pitfalls of the Dark Triad (Schrader, 2021). Some scholars have praised the Dark Triad but this approach of lauding the qualities of the Dark Triad

to be successful as a leader has been contended due to its questionable approach to ethics.

Now, how does the Dark Triad play out in startups? It has been seen that in smaller organizations, where complex systems of checks and balances are not present, the nature of the leader has a strong influence on its culture. When it comes to leadership, self-sacrificing leaders are more productive and they elicit stronger performance from their employees (Knippenberg and Knippenberg, 2005). But given the short-term, myopic orientation of the leaders, leaders in startups may not exhibit self-sacrificing traits. The downside of the permeating nature of leadership traits implies that their "shadow" which may consist of the Dark Triad may have cultural implications. "Shadow" is an aspect of one's personality that includes all of the parts of oneself that one does not want to admit or probably even be aware of. It is essentially the unconscious side and the Dark Triad lurks menacingly in this abyss.

Talking about their leaders, one employee stated,

"One of the founders (or maybe both, did not meet the other much) has a very aggressive attitude and folks say that internal aggressive culture is a reflection of that founder's personality which has shaped the org culture. In one of the annual meet a function, the founder was addressing the charged-up junta lapping up wisdom that if you work here your mind should always be focused on how we can do better every day. If you want the peace of mind and peaceful sleep, this place is not for you".

Value	Statement
2.78	There are/ were cliques or strong ingroups present in the startup.
3.17	The leadership is/ was boastful of their accomplishments.
3.09	I think the top leaders are/ were capable of cutting corners in order to be successful.
2.78	I think the top leaders are/ were exploitative in nature.
2.30	My contributions are/ were recognized by the top leaders.
2.35	The leaders are/ were generous in giving credit.

This begs the question, what is the Dark Triad?

Dark Triad consists of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

Narcissism is a selfish interest or admiration of oneself, and narcissists tend to be overly self-absorbed and motivated by gaining admiration from others and maintaining a grandiose self-image. Psychopathy is identified by overt signs of superficial emotional reactions. Personality traits associated with psychopathy includes a lack of empathy or regret, antisocial behaviour, and volatility. As discussed earlier, leaders who exhibit the Dark Triad traits have been found to be successful, at least in the short term (Furham et at., 2013). Of course, certain traits of the Dark Triad can make a leader successful especially when coupled with intelligence and physical attractiveness (Hogan, 2007). Narcissists seem to use soft manipulation tactics and psychopaths chose harder tactics. Machs are the most adaptable: they chose both soft and hard tactics. However, these traits enable the leader to get ahead but not get along and this aspect of leadership is likely to have negative cultural implications.

What may be the antidote for toxicity?

Given the awareness of the pitfalls of leadership personality, which may be difficult to change more profoundly, there lie certain possibilities in coping with the issue. Of course, a deep introspection with a bias for change would be authentically useful to the leader and the organization in the long run. However, certain processes can occur simultaneously. But, let us first discuss leadership awareness.

Leadership Awareness

Leaders might need to be cognizant of their nature. In fact, a sense of self may help them get a reign of their "shadow". Given the lack of broader life learnings, young leaders may have to expedite their learnings and focus on their development with strong commitment. They may need constant feedback from trusted allies and mentors who are invested in their growth. They may even resort to personality assessment and leadership coaches. While heavily acknowledging their strengths, they need to be cognizant of their derailers. Derailers often surface during stressful situations.

Coping mechanisms during childhood and their attachment styles with peers and parental figures may have had a huge impact on their behavioural styles. A maladapted coping mechanism may eventually hurt the organization. The first step is to observe their behaviours and their consequences following which they may introspect and analyse the underlying causes of that behaviour. Needless to say, the process starts with acceptance. Insert anecdote here

Following are a few suggestions for the leaders to inculcate self-awareness:

1 — Keep a journal and track daily events consisting of both positive and negative events

2 — Make use of personality tests that uncover strengths, derailers and motivations

3 — Receive feedback from peers regularly and discover blind spots; listen with a bias to change self's opinion

4 — Make use of mentorship and discuss issues with trusted allies who are not there to appease

5 — Introspect the life journey so far and think about life events that may have shaped their motivations and cognitive styles

6 — Make use of a leadership coach

While the leader delves into self-awareness, a lot can be done within the organization to create a positive culture. A positive culture is marked by psychological safety which enables the organization to receive feedback and correct its course. As discussed earlier in the study, it helps the organization to create a sustainable culture which leads to lower attrition rates.

What can be done about the workplace environment?

Dignity at workplace

Let us consider the concept of dignity and how it impacts organizational culture. In a negative work culture, the dignity of the employee is at stake. In general, dignity is described as a personal sense of worth, value, respect, or regard that comes from one's humanity and social status, as well as being treated with respect by others (Lee, 2008). Dignity can be experienced, felt, recognised, realised, sought, lost, or found in this manner (Lucas, 2015). In workplaces, it is common to observe 'earned dignity'. Earned dignity is the concept that dignity is conditional; some people achieve higher dignity and advantages as a result of their various qualities, talents, and efforts than others (Brennan and Lo, 2007). Dignity is meritocratic and self-generated in this way. While employment can mean a social relationship, it is an economic exchange between the two parties. Due to the economic consequences and the short-term goal orientation of the leaders, dignity may be a foreign concept in the startups. According to an HR Business Partner with an experience over 10 years in organizations focusing on gig economy,

"Many instances of a poor culture can be found in the way meetings are conducted, the said and the unsaid rules that are laid down. The false sense of urgency, constant scrutiny, unnecessary pressure & lack of trust becomes the way of life at work. Unfortunately, this has a lasting effect on people with them losing self-confidence, and questioning their self worth which becomes their second nature."

However, there may be hope.

Due to the social nature of the exchange, there lies a possibility that dignity can be achieved independent of the transactional conditions. One's identity, self-esteem and a flourishing ego state can be achieved due to relational associations. However, when this aspect is downplayed, individuals get dehumanized as lumps of human capital caged by the structures of power and control that threaten to constrain their agency. This exploitative aspect, when heightened, creates a negative work environment. Hustle culture, which is dominantly a profit-driven culture that glorifies long working hours and sacrifice of *personal life, have been inherently*

exploitative (Kurter, 2021) which in turn contributes to a negative work environment.

Notice your employees!

As defined, dignity is felt from a personal sense of worth, value, and respect. Humans need to feel wanted and to feel noticed (Amodeo, 2016). This leads to a higher sense of self-worth. The feeling of being capable and special is a powerful motivator for employees to exceed expectations. This also inculcates a sense of belonging and ownership. By notice, a cursory greeting is not enough. It is the dignified acknowledgement of the existence of the human being whose identity lies well beyond the organizational realm. Notice is about knowing about the contributions of the individual, the individual's potential, and the acknowledgement of the individual as a human being. Without the latter, there can exist a lack of diversity and inclusion thereby alienating the employee. A lot rides on respect and dignity in the organization. and a sense of loyalty. This is termed a "reverie". Organizations should aim to create a reverie. The employee's first brush with the organization occurs in the team. Hence, the team leaders need to be sensitised to this phenomenon and this needs to be an active process. Of course, there may not be any short terms incentives unless the organization specifically works on them. However, certain behaviours may definitely be discouraged with repercussions. This can happen only when the top leadership understands the long-term value of culture.

39.13% of the employees that we interviewed stated that they were not known to the top leadership. The average age of the respondents was 31 years.

Dialogue and reverie

What happens when we are noticed? What happens when we know it is possible to have psychological safety in the workplace? Psychological safety encourages the employees to voice their concerns and allows them to innovate and experiment. This helps the organization to explore better ways of operating and better products and services. According to research, successful teams and organizations make more mistakes than unsuccessful ones (Bergmann and Schaeppi, 2016). Continuous flowing dialogue in an organization creates a safe environment and a sense of loyalty. This is termed a "reverie". Organizations should aim to create a reverie.
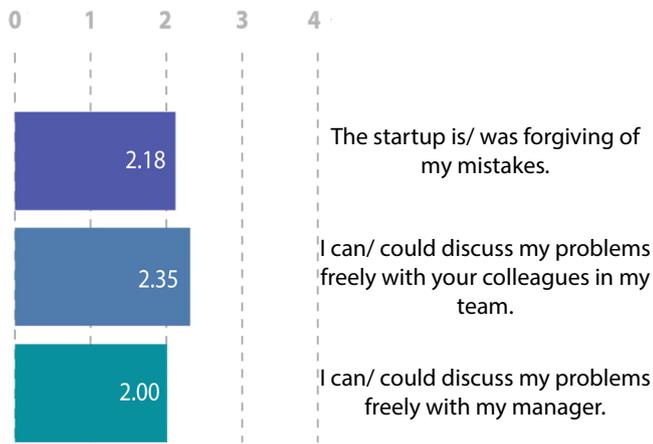
"A reverie is an idea that originally began with developmental psychology and describes the way an infant, a baby, makes sense of the world. So a reverie is an open-ended exchange, what we might think of as a free floating exchange between the infant and its primary caregiver. It doesn't have any direction, it doesn't have any outcomes. It's simply a way of processing what might be happening in a way to make meaning. So, when we think about a reverie, what we're really thinking about is a conversation, a dialogue, but one that has no immediately defined endgame.

Reverie is not about teaching or explaining something. Reverie is a way of helping people explore and make sense of complex problems where the answer may not be immediately obvious, the solutions may not be immediately obvious. The real value of a reverie is it allows people to begin to make sense together of the complex problems that they face within an organisation".

Prof. Laurence Barrett
Director, Heresy Consulting Limited
Practicum Supervisor and Coach, Executive Masters in Change, INSEAD

	0	1	2	3	4
2.18					The startup is/ was forgiving of my mistakes.
2.35					I can/ could discuss my problems freely with your colleagues in my team.
2.00					I can/ could discuss my problems freely with my manager.

But, what can get in the way?

Historically, humankind always has glorified its leaders and has assumed them to have extraordinary skills. This phenomenon can be explained by Great Man Theory which is attributed to the famous Scottish essayist and philosopher Thomas Carlyle. For example, let us consider how we view heroes and leaders in our great epics, films, and the political leaders around us. Joseph Stalin's Cult of Personality revolved around lionization and idealization of himself which was later criticized by Nikita Khrushchev in 1957. On top of that, power distance is high in most geographies, especially in South Asian countries (Sweetman 2010). Power distance is the distance that a person feels and maintains between himself and someone in a position of power. In other words, subordinates keep a distance from their bosses and overtly display respect and reverence.

Unlike Asia, American culture has less power distance which means subordinates consider their boss to be friendly and negotiable for their decisions. This means, that in countries where there is higher power distance, it might be difficult to have free-flowing, casual conversations with the leaders. This cultural aspect itself poses a behavioural challenge in the workplace. Hence, the possibilities of hero worship and power distance may come in the way of free-flowing, respectful, and egalitarian dialogue in an organization. This is something that leaders need to consider while expecting dialogue from their subordinates.

Egocentric agency

Employees who are acknowledged and can be themselves in a safe environment can make better decisions for the organization. They are better equipped to make decisions which are not clouded by anxiety and fear. This also helps the organization to adapt and implement corrective measures. Ego helps in scanning the environment, controlling impulses, and planning. It helps human beings weigh in all the options while gauging the possibilities. Once the employees achieve a sense of agency coupled with the best version of their ego, effective decisions and actions can be mobilised. This leads to greater organizational effectiveness.

"Agency comes out of reverie. If in that discussion we can then co-create an idea, I've built agency because the idea is partly mine. The participation in a reverie allows somebody to create a sense of the future that they share and they have built. So, rather than simply a line manager or a leader explaining a solution which somebody may or may not agree with, a reverie allows you to participate in the development of that future which brings agency and creates stronger ego in the clinical sense, not in the popular sense, and that makes you more resilient".

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Implications

This paper suggests that a lot of the onus lies on the leader. Hence, leadership development that enables leadership awareness is key to a positive workplace environment. The leader should understand their "shadow" and the consequences of their "shadow". Effects of the "shadow" trickle down in smaller organizations with very little resistance.

To cope with the toxicity and to create a positive change, a considerable amount of focus should be given to psychological safety and respectful behaviour in the startups. Psychological safety enables the employees to express themselves without fear and they can take more ownership of their work. Ownership of work leads to organizational success. This also minimizes the need to micromanage and constantly check on the employee. However, this process also includes the acknowledgement of the employee's contribution and identity without which there may be a lack of sense of ownership and belonging. Constant respectful dialogue and a safe environment can only result in the creation of a lasting positive culture.

> *The survival of the employees revolves around adapting to the leader since there are no accountable systems and sources of counter influences in place. Hence, leadership awareness is key in changing the culture.*

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