






Human Resource Management in Managing Toxic Workplaces: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

A toxic workplace is a critical organizational issue characterized by interpersonal conflict, bullying, and unfair managerial practices that significantly impair employee well-being and organizational performance. This study aims to analyze and synthesize the strategic roles of Human Resource Management (HRM) in preventing, managing, and transforming toxic work environments. Employing a qualitative systematic literature review approach, this study analyzed 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and 2026, drawn from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The theoretical framework integrates the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Psychological Safety Theory to provide a multi-layered explanation of how HRM functions as both a protective and transformative organizational mechanism. The findings reveal four strategically interrelated HRM roles: (1) Prevention through value-based recruitment and transparent policies; (2) Intervention through anonymous reporting channels and conflict mediation; (3) Mitigation through Employee Assistance Programs and supportive leadership; and (4) Cultural Transformation through developmental performance appraisal and employee engagement. Theoretically, this study extends the JD-R Model to toxic workplace contexts and proposes an integrated four-role conceptual model. Practically, it offers a structured seven-step implementation framework.

Keywords: Employee Well-being, Human Resource Management, Management Practices, Organizational Behavior, Toxic Workplace



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1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex and competitive era of globalization, organizations face significant challenges arising not only from external factors but also from internal dynamics. One of the most critical internal issues is the presence of an unhealthy or toxic work environment. A toxic workplace is defined as a condition characterized by poor communication, interpersonal conflict, unfair managerial practices, and negative behaviors such as bullying, discrimination, and lack of social support [1]. These conditions directly threaten employees psychological and physical well-being.

The negative impacts of a toxic workplace are substantial. Research indicates that such environments have a positive and significant effect on employee job stress. Employees exposed to these conditions often experience emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, and increased mental and physical fatigue [2]. Over time, these effects contribute to reduced productivity, higher absenteeism, and increased turnover intentions, ultimately undermining organizational performance and competitiveness [3]. Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a crucial role in determining organizational success or failure [4]. Its function extends beyond administrative responsibilities to a strategic role in fostering a supportive and productive work environment [5]. In the context of toxic workplaces, HRM must act as a key agent of change. However, many organizations remain reactive, addressing only surface-level symptoms such as high employee turnover without tackling the underlying causes of workplace toxicity [6].

From an Organizational Behavior perspective, unhealthy workplace conditions do not emerge spontaneously but develop through a series of interconnected processes, including dysfunctional interpersonal interactions, ineffective leadership, and organizational norms that gradually shape employees' attitudes and behaviors in a less adaptive direction. These conditions are closely associated with employee well-being, which encompasses not only physical aspects but also

psychological and emotional states that are strongly influenced by the daily work environment [7].

A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that when the organizational climate is poor and social interactions are dominated by negative behaviors, the impact is substantial, including decreased employee well-being, increased fatigue, and a higher tendency toward disengagement [8]. However, other studies suggest that such conditions can be mitigated through organizational interventions that focus on behavioral aspects [9]. Despite a growing body of research on workplace toxicity [2] and HRM best practices [7], the literature remains largely fragmented, with studies addressing isolated HRM functions such as recruitment [10] or conflict mediation [11] without synthesizing them into an integrated strategic framework. No existing conceptual model links prevention, intervention, mitigation, and cultural transformation as dynamically interrelated HRM roles within the specific context of toxic workplaces. This gap represents a critical limitation for both theory and practice.

This study aims to analyze and explain the strategic role of Human Resource Management in managing and mitigating toxic work environments. Through a literature review, this research identifies key HRM functions involved in prevention, intervention, and the development of a healthy and resilient organizational culture. This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions by demonstrating how HRM can evolve from a purely administrative function into a strategic driver in addressing the negative impacts of toxic work environments.

2. METHOD

To establish a robust conceptual foundation, this study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks that collectively explain how HRM functions as a preventive, corrective, and transformative force within toxic work environments.

2.1 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R model posits that occupational well-being is determined by the balance between job demands factors that require sustained physical or psychological effort and job resources, which are organizational features that facilitate goal achievement and mitigate the adverse effects of demands [12]. In the context of toxic workplaces, persistent interpersonal conflict, bullying, and managerial unfairness function as chronic job demands that deplete employees' cognitive and emotional reserves, ultimately leading to burnout and disengagement [8]. This study extends the JD-R framework by positioning HRM as the primary organizational mechanism for supplying job resources including supervisory support, role clarity, procedural fairness, and development opportunities that buffer employees against toxic demands and restore motivational energy. Specifically, the four strategic HRM roles proposed in this study (prevention, intervention, mitigation, and cultural transformation) correspond to distinct resource-provision strategies operating at different stages of workplace toxicity. Social Exchange Theory (SET).

2.2 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory conceptualizes the employment relationship as a series of interdependent exchanges governed by norms of reciprocity [13]. When organizations, through their HRM systems, demonstrate genuine commitment to employee welfare through fair procedures, transparent communication, and developmental support, employees are motivated to reciprocate with higher levels of loyalty, organizational citizenship behavior, and performance. Conversely, toxic workplace conditions signal to employees that the organization has violated the implicit social contract, eroded trust and triggering withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism and turnover intention. This study applies SET to explain why comprehensive, employee-centered HRM policies are not merely administratively beneficial but are strategically essential: by restoring perceived organizational fairness, HRM reinitializes positive reciprocal cycles that counteract the corrosive effects of workplace toxicity.

2.3 Psychological Safety Theory

Psychological safety refers to the shared belief among team members that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking including voicing dissent, reporting errors, and challenging prevailing norms without fear of humiliation, punishment, or social exclusion [14]. Toxic work environments systematically destroy psychological safety by normalizing punitive responses to honest communication and reinforcing cultures of silence. HRM plays a pivotal role in restoring this condition through the establishment of anonymous reporting mechanisms, the enforcement of non-retaliation policies, and the development of psychologically safe leadership practices. Empirical evidence suggests that organizations with higher psychological safety exhibit greater innovation, lower conflict escalation, and stronger interpersonal trust all of which are foundational to the cultural transformation phase of the proposed HRM model.

Theoretical Integration

Taken together, these three theories provide complementary yet distinct explanatory lenses: the JD-R Model addresses the psychophysiological mechanisms through which toxicity depletes employees and HRM restores resources; SET explains the relational and motivational dynamics that drive employee reciprocity in response to fair HRM practices; and Psychological Safety Theory accounts for the organizational climate conditions that must be established before individual- and team-level transformation can occur. This integrated framework allows the proposed four-role HRM model to be theoretically grounded across multiple levels of analysis individual, relational, and organizational thereby strengthening both its explanatory power and practical applicability. This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review approach to synthesize existing knowledge on the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in managing toxic workplaces.

2.4 Literature Search Procedure:

A systematic search was conducted in three academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search covered the period from 2016 to 2026 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies. The following keyword combinations were used with Boolean operators: "Toxic Workplace" AND "Human Resource Management" AND "Employee Well-Being" AND "Organizational Behavior" AND "Management Practices".

2.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (1) published in peer-reviewed journals, (2) written in either English or Indonesian, (3) empirical or conceptual studies, and (4) available in full text. Exclusion criteria included conference proceedings, book chapters, non-academic opinion pieces, and articles published.

2.6 Article Screening Process:

The screening process followed a two-stage procedure. First, the title and abstract of all retrieved articles were examined. From an initial total of 120 articles, this step reduced the number to 45 articles. Second, the full text of the remaining 45 articles was assessed for eligibility. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 articles were finally selected as relevant for the analysis. This process was conducted transparently to ensure reproducibility.

2.7 Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes across the selected articles. The analysis consisted of three steps: (1) data reduction grouping findings from the literature into initial codes; (2) data display arranging the coded themes into a thematic matrix to facilitate comparison; and (3) conclusion drawing synthesizing the themes to identify four strategic roles of HRM in managing toxic workplaces.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified four strategically interrelated HRM roles. The following discussion presents each role with critical comparison to prior studies and explicit organizational implications.

3.1 prevention: Proactive HRM Strategies

Prevention represents the first and most cost-effective line of defense against workplace toxicity. Proactive HRM strategies including value-based recruitment, behavioral socialization, and the establishment of clear organizational norms are consistently more effective than reactive approaches in maintaining a healthy workplace climate. Strategic management practices grounded in organizational values have been shown to significantly reduce dysfunctional interpersonal behavior, particularly in SME contexts [10]. However, socialization and values-based onboarding alone are insufficient unless paired with credible enforcement mechanisms, as organizations that communicate behavioral norms without consistently applying graduated sanctions effectively signal to employees that violations are tolerable [15]. This erosion of norm credibility undermines the preventive function of HRM and increases vulnerability to toxic behaviors [16]. Therefore, this study concludes that prevention must be operationalized as a two-component system normative clarity combined with sanctioning credibility if it is to create genuine deterrence against workplace toxicity.

3.2 intervention: Responsive HRM Actions

When toxic behaviors have already emerged, the speed and structural integrity of HRM intervention become critical determinants of organizational trust. The availability of anonymous complaint channels has been shown to significantly increase employees' willingness to report toxic leadership behaviors, thereby reducing the normalization of abuse in organizational settings [17]. However, the mere availability of reporting mechanisms is insufficient without structural guarantees of neutrality in subsequent mediation processes. Mediation outcomes are substantially more positive when mediators are perceived as genuinely neutral and enjoy visible backing from top management [11]. This study extends these findings by arguing that intervention without firm and consistent sanctioning not only fails to resolve the immediate conflict but actively damages HRM's institutional credibility, making future prevention and intervention efforts less effective. Accordingly, organizations must design intervention systems that integrate reporting channels, neutral mediation, and clear consequence structures as mutually reinforcing components.

3.3 Mitigation: Reducing Negative Impacts

For employees who have already been exposed to sustained toxicity, the priority shifts from preventing or resolving conflict to restoring psychological and occupational functioning. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) offering free and confidential counseling represent the most evidence-supported mitigation tool available to HRM practitioners. Caring and supportive leadership characterized by empathetic communication and genuine concern for employee welfare has been demonstrated to measurably reduce interpersonal conflict and counterproductive work behavior [18]. This study builds on this finding by emphasizing that psychological safety, and operationalized through HRM practices, must be re-established as a prerequisite condition before other recovery-oriented interventions can succeed. Without a foundational sense of interpersonal safety, employees are unlikely to engage authentically with counseling programs, training initiatives, or leadership development efforts. Mitigation, therefore, is not merely a welfare function it is a strategic prerequisite for the cultural transformation phase that follows.

3.4 Cultural Transformation: Building Long-term Resilience

The ultimate and most enduring objective of HRM in managing toxic workplaces is to shift the organizational culture from one that tolerates or produces toxicity to one that actively cultivates psychological safety, integrity, and collaborative excellence. Workplace mental health research highlights that sustainable organizational culture requires moving beyond performative compliance toward genuine and systemic behavioral change embedded in everyday managerial practices [19]. Similarly, employee commitment and performance are significantly influenced by career development systems and motivational structures that recognize both intrinsic and extrinsic contributions [20]. This study translates these insights into a concrete HRM recommendation: organizations must transition from purely financial, KPI-based performance appraisal systems toward developmental, behavior-based, and integrity-based evaluation frameworks that reward collaboration, ethical conduct, and interpersonal contribution not merely individual output. Such a shift sends a powerful organizational signal that the culture has genuinely changed, reinforcing the transformation from within.

These findings collectively indicate that HRM interventions function not only as administrative mechanisms but also as strategic organizational resources that shape employee well-being, psychological safety, and long-term organizational resilience. Organizations with weak or fragmented HRM support systems are structurally more vulnerable to persistent workplace toxicity, employee disengagement, and elevated turnover intention. HRM must therefore be positioned as a proactive strategic partner not merely an administrative function in the sustained effort to prevent, manage, and transform toxic work environments.

3.5 Proposed Conceptual Model

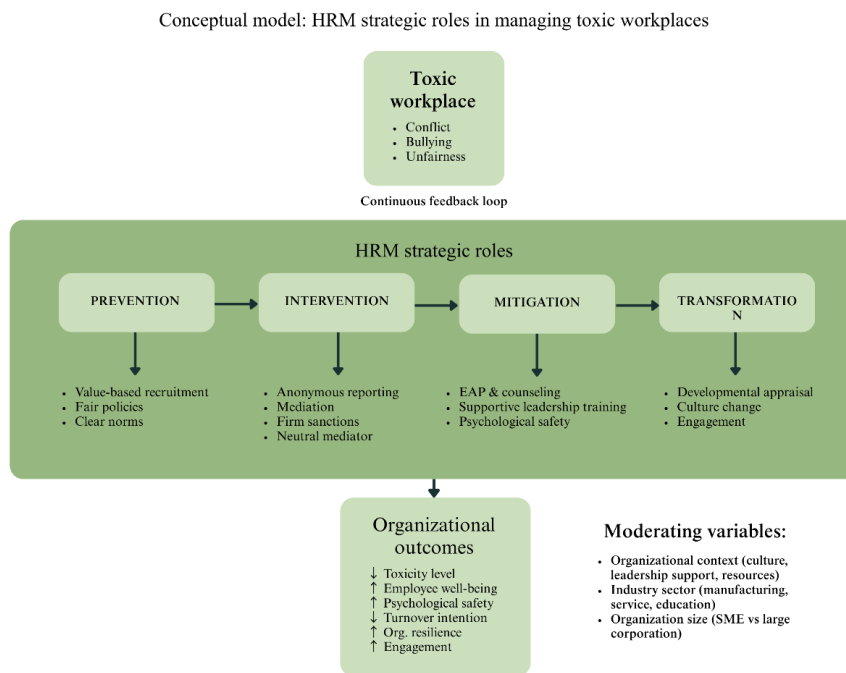


Figure 1. Strategic HRM Model for Managing Toxic Workplace

Table 1. The key HRM functions and expected outcomes for each strategic role.

Strategic Role	Key HRM Functions	Expected Outcomes
Prevention	Recruitment, Selection, Socialization, Fair Policies	Hiring fit individuals, clear behavioral norms
Intervention	Communication channels, Mediation, Sanctions	Resolved conflicts, accountability for toxic acts
Mitigation	EAP, Counseling, Supportive Leadership Training	Reduced employee stress, increased psychological safety
Transformation	Culture change, Developmental appraisal, Engagement	A resilient, positive, and inclusive work ecosystem

This model implies that HRM must function as a dynamic and integrated system. Failure in one area (e.g., weak intervention) can undermine prevention efforts. Therefore, organizational leadership must fully commit to empowering HRM to carry out this strategic role.

3.6 Practical Implications

For managers and HR practitioners, the following concrete recommendations are provided:

1. Step 1 – Initial Assessment
Conduct an anonymous organizational climate survey to measure the level of toxicity (e.g., frequency of conflict, perceptions of unfairness, stress levels).
2. Step 2 – Policy Development
Establish an anti-toxicity policy that defines toxic behaviors, reporting procedures, and graduated sanctions (warning to termination).
3. Step 3 – Training
Provide mandatory training for all managers on emotional intelligence, non-violent communication, and conflict mediation.
4. Step 4 – Reporting Channels
Provide an anonymous third-party hotline or digital platform for reports without fear.
5. Step 5 – Well-being Program
Launch an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) with free and confidential counseling.
6. Step 6 – New Performance Appraisal
Change the appraisal system from purely financial KPIs to value-based (collaboration, integrity, helping colleagues).
7. Step 7 – Periodic Evaluation
Conduct follow-up surveys every 6 months to measure changes and adjust strategies accordingly.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Human Resource Management occupies a strategic rather than merely administrative role in managing and transforming toxic workplace environments. Through a systematic review of 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and 2026, four interrelated HRM roles were identified and theoretically grounded: Prevention, which addresses the conditions that produce toxicity before it emerges; Intervention, which responds to toxic behaviors through structured, credible, and neutral processes; Mitigation, which restores the well-being and psychological safety of affected employees; and Cultural Transformation, which embeds long-term organizational resilience through developmental appraisal and genuine engagement. These roles are not sequential in a rigid linear sense but are dynamically interlinked the effectiveness of each is contingent upon the integrity of the others as illustrated in the proposed integrated conceptual model (Figure 1), which is theoretically anchored in the JD-R Model, Social Exchange Theory, and Psychological Safety Theory.

This study makes two primary contributions. Theoretically, it extends the JD-R Model into the specific context of toxic workplace management, demonstrating that HRM's resource-provision function can be systematically mapped onto four distinct intervention stages. Practically, it provides HR managers and organizational leaders with a structured, step-by-step implementation framework that connects evidence-based HRM practices to measurable organizational outcomes. This study is not without limitations. As a conceptual literature review, its findings are theoretical in nature and have not been empirically tested in specific organizational or sectoral contexts. The study also relied on a bounded set of databases and inclusion criteria, which may exclude relevant grey literature or discipline-adjacent studies. Future research is encouraged to empirically validate the proposed four-role model through quantitative survey methods across multiple industry sectors including manufacturing, services, and education and to examine contextual moderators such as organizational size, national culture, and leadership style that may influence the relative effectiveness of each HRM role in practice.

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