



Toxic Workplaces: A Barrier to Pacific Development

Pacific professionals and institutions need capacity strengthening to achieve people-centered development goals in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.¹ A significant barrier is toxic workplace culture that adversely impacts some of the most innovative Pacific professionals, undermining institutional capacity.² Resolving this widespread issue requires solutions that address root causes, which relate to trauma and oppressive social systems.³

Toxic Workplaces and their Impact in the Pacific

The signature characteristics of a toxic workplace include regularly feeling left out, bullied, and treated unfairly. If one cannot speak out against overwork, for instance – or if one does, there is backlash – it is a toxic environment.⁴ Additionally, lack of trust and transparency; a competitive or blame culture; being micromanaged or unappreciated are marks of a toxic environment.⁵ Psychological safety – the feeling that you can make mistakes, raise concerns and innovate without being judged – is often missing, as well as a sense of belonging, willingness to help each other, inclusion, and strong risk tolerance.⁶

¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022).

² Sara N. Amin, Danielle Watson, and Christian Girard, eds., *Mapping Security in the Pacific: A Focus on Context, Gender and Organisational Culture* (London: Routledge, 2020), note especially the chapters on organisational culture and power.

³ Vincent J. Felitti et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–258.

⁴ S. Faisal Rasool et al., “How Toxic Workplace Environment Effects the Employee Engagement: The Mediating Role of Organizational Support and Employee Wellbeing,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 5 (2021): 2294. Bart Verkuil, Serpil Atasayi, and Marc L. Molendijk, “Workplace Bullying and Mental Health: A Meta-Analysis on Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Data,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 8 (2015): e0135225.

⁵ Qualtrics. “What Is Toxic Work Culture and How Can You Address It?” Accessed August 18, 2025. <https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/employee/toxic-work-culture/>.

⁶ Amy C. Edmondson, “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1999): 350–383.



A primary driver of toxic workplace behaviors is poor leadership.⁷ Three personality traits, known as the ‘dark triad’: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, are often at play.⁸ Simply put, narcissism is an insecure obsession with self that results in relentless manipulation; Machiavellianism is abuse of power; and psychopathy is the inability to control emotions. Research shows anxiety, burnout, and depression can result from having a toxic manager who is constantly targeting you.⁹ As a coach and Human Resource Consultant working across the Pacific and globally, almost 80% of my work involves helping Pacific and global leaders and teams cope with toxic workplaces.

Impacts at the individual level include mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress.¹⁰ For example, one client, Asenaca¹¹ described nightmares, self-doubt, and lingering fear of being admonished by their current supervisor, *even after* leaving the toxic workplace and starting in a new position where her supervisor was kind. Another impact involves self-loathing, low self-esteem, and feeling isolated. My client, Manu, was dejected after being scapegoated by their boss’ cousin – who was given a position he was unqualified for – a classic case of nepotism,¹² which also contributes to toxicity in the workplace. An extreme example from my book, *Becoming Bulletproof: Protecting yourself from Narcissistic Abuse*, is that of Shelley, a narcissist who attempted to destroy my client Piper’s career (Cornelius, 2025, 51).¹³

⁷ Mdhlalose, Dickson. “The Outcomes of a Toxic Work Environment on Employee Engagement: The Boss Approach as the Moderating Variable.” *Journal of Management and Business Education* 8, no. 1 (2025): 111–26. <https://doi.org/10.35564/jmbe.2025.0007> and Stefanie Braun, Marcus Kühnel, and Claudia Frey, “Leader Narcissism and Outcomes in Organizations: A Review at Multiple Levels of Analysis,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 773.

⁸ MIT Sloan School of Management. “Fixing a Toxic Work Culture: Guarding against the ‘Dark Triad’.” Accessed August 18, 2025. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/fixing-a-toxic-work-culture-guarding-against-dark-triad> and Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams, “The Dark Triad of Personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 36, no. 6 (2002): 556–563.

⁹ Bart Verkuil, Serpil Atasayi, and Marc L. Molendijk, “Workplace Bullying and Mental Health: A Meta-Analysis on Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Data,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 8 (2015): e0135225 and Rolf Holmgren et al., “Workplace Bullying, Symptoms of Anxiety and the Interaction with Work-Related Factors: A Longitudinal Study,” *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health* 95, no. 4 (2022): 779–790.

¹⁰ Bart Verkuil, Serpil Atasayi, and Marc L. Molendijk, “Workplace Bullying and Mental Health: A Meta-Analysis on Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Data,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 8 (2015): e0135225. S. Faisal Rasool et al., “How Toxic Workplace Environment Effects the Employee Engagement,” *IJERPH* 18, no. 5 (2021): 2294.

¹¹ All names are pseudonyms to protect client confidentiality.

¹² Academy to Innovate HR (AIHR). “Nepotism in the Workplace: Identify 6 Toxic Signs.” Blog post by Andrea Boatman. Accessed August 18, 2025. <https://www.aihr.com/blog/nepotism-in-the-workplace/>

¹³ Cornelius, Marilyn. *Becoming Bulletproof: Protecting Yourself from Narcissistic Abuse*. Alchemus Prime, January 4, 2025. 105 pp. ISBN 979-8302573421.



Impacts of toxic workplaces are considerable at the team and organisational levels as well. Employee productivity and engagement plummet due to lowered morale, and professional growth opportunities diminish due to the dysfunction.¹⁴ Often, the most innovative people leave for foreign-owned workplaces with robust HR policies, or start consulting.¹⁵ Pacific institutions become crippled, and bear the high costs of ongoing recruitment. Many of my coaching clients are Pacific innovators who have left their jobs in national or regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), governments, United Nations agencies, Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies, and even some prominent feminist organisations in the Pacific.

Unpacking Pacific Causes, Contexts, and Solutions

Based on my observations across 140 individual coaching clients and 15 teams in the last seven years, I have discovered an emerging pattern related to toxic workplaces in the Pacific – this matches research on organisational culture and power.¹⁶ There is typically a longstanding leader with narcissistic tendencies who emotionally and verbally abuses staff. This person makes staff do their work, steals the credit, publicly berates and ridicules staff, and destroys their self-esteem while overworking them. Pacific employees tolerate such abusive behaviour for various reasons. Power dynamics, office politics, and weak HR policies often do not provide safe avenues for raising concerns. Staff are also accustomed to staying silent, bearing the abuse, and quietly resigning when an opportunity appears – such behavior could be linked to familial, cultural, patriarchal, colonial, traditional, religious, or other social norms.¹⁷

¹⁴ S. Faisal Rasool et al., “How Toxic Workplace Environment Effects the Employee Engagement,” *IJERPH* 18, no. 5 (2021): 2294. Bart Verkuil, Serpil Atasayi, and Marc L. Molendijk, “Workplace Bullying and Mental Health,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 8 (2015): e0135225.

¹⁵ Harold S. Hillman and Alex Waddell, *The Transformation of SPREP: A Story of Organisational Renewal* (Apia, Samoa: Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2014), esp. sections discussing leadership, staff engagement, and organisational change in a Pacific regional organisation. Pacific Public Service Fale, “Pacific Public Service Leaders Fono 2025,” news coverage in *Fiji One News*, November 18, 2025, highlighting regional commitments to ethical leadership and inclusive workplaces.

¹⁶ Sara N. Amin, Danielle Watson, and Christian Girard, eds., *Mapping Security in the Pacific: A Focus on Context, Gender and Organisational Culture* (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁷ Barkha Āurfina, review of *Mapping Security in the Pacific: A Focus on Context, Gender and Organisational Culture*, by Sara N. Amin, Danielle Watson, and Christian Girard, *New Zealand Political Studies* 29, no. 1 (2024). “Gender-Based Violence in Fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region,” Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme, resource brief, 2023.



As a result, abusive cycles continue, with toxic workplaces effectively functioning as microcosms of employees' pasts. For example, a boy who was regularly beaten and berated by his father, internalizes that behaviour as a norm, and beats and berates his sister. He is a bully who becomes the director of an agency because others fear him. The sister, who was bullied throughout childhood, becomes a staff member who stays in a toxic NGO culture and tolerates the abuse. I have developed a framework (Figure 1), to illustrate how toxic workplaces in the Pacific serve as microcosms of past trauma, embedded within the complex co-influences of harmful social systems like patriarchy and colonialism, which still significantly influence Pacific workplaces.¹⁸ In short, personal trauma feeds oppressive organisational cultures, which result in toxic workplaces.

Microcosms of Past Pain: A Framework for Toxic Workplaces

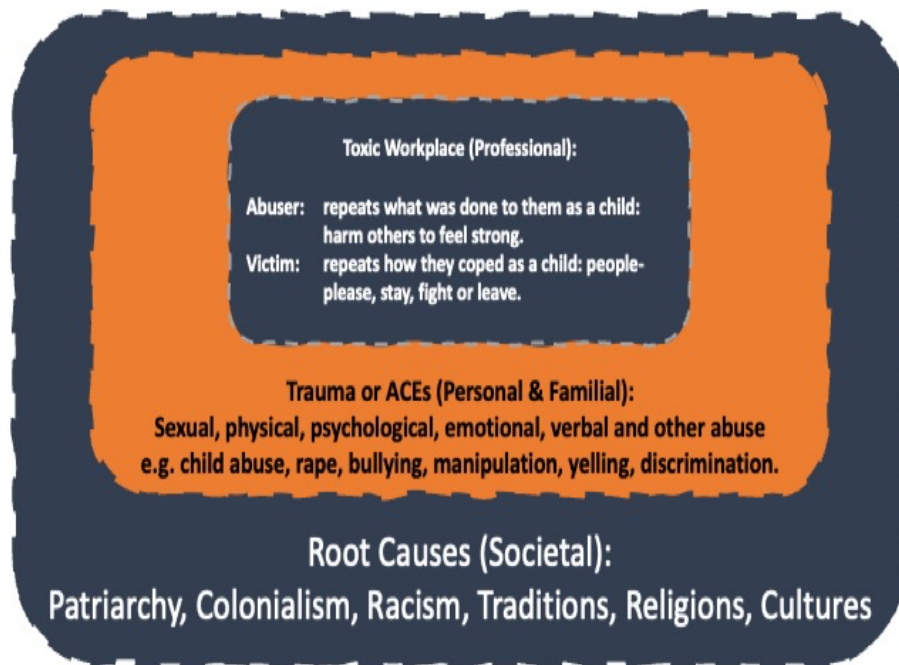


Figure 1: A framework for considering toxic workplaces in the Pacific.

To be effective, solutions must address root causes through structural solutions.¹⁹ In my experience, individual leaders can address past hurt through trauma-informed coaching. Team dynamics sessions that incorporate boundary setting, psychological safety, trust, transparency,

¹⁸ Vincent J. Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," *AJPM* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–258 (ACE framework). Center for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice, *Trauma-Informed Workplaces Toolkit* (Washington, DC: CTIPP, 2023).

¹⁹ For example, see: Fiji Ministry of Civil Service, *Workplace Harassment, Discrimination and Anti-Bullying Policy* (Suva, Fiji: Ministry of Civil Service, 2024).



and collective care can be efficacious.²⁰ Both approaches inform each other to develop a vocabulary for communicating about these issues, healing, and adopting healthy workplace practices by addressing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), gendered exploitation,²¹ glass ceilings,²² and other workplace challenges (Figure 2). Trauma-informed leadership, plus individual and team interventions can operationalize solutions.

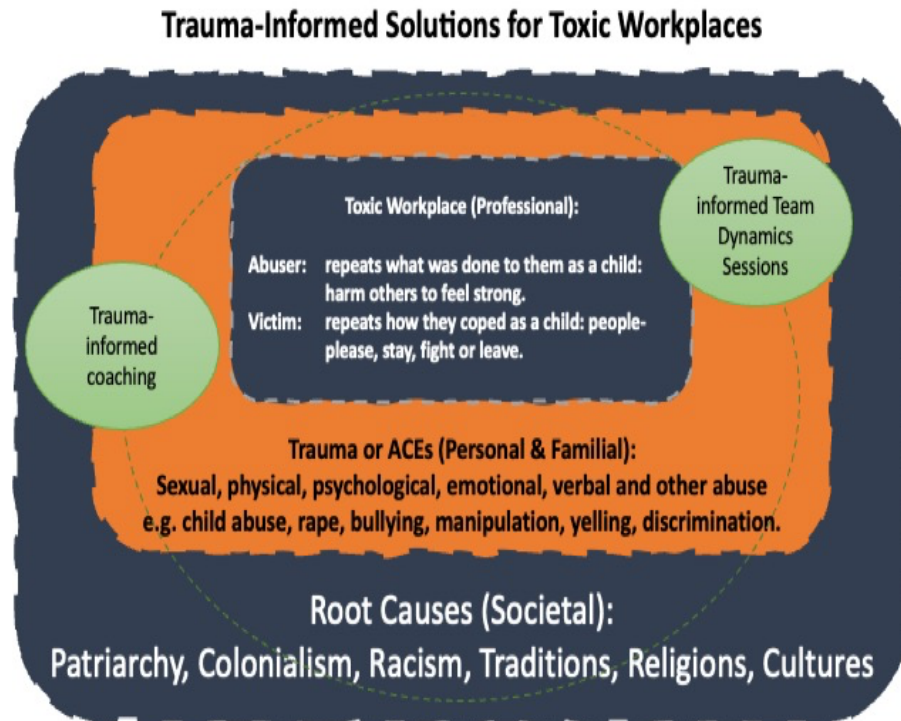


Figure 2: Trauma-informed coaching and team dynamics sessions can help heal toxic workplaces.

One hurdle remains, however: people with narcissistic tendencies deny accountability (Cornelius, 2025, 23).²³ Therefore, it is often up to victims to empower themselves and learn to speak up

²⁰ Transformation Team, "Trauma-Informed Workplaces: Building Your Organisational Culture," NHS Health Scotland/Healthy Working Lives, updated December 12, 2025. Center for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice, *Trauma-Informed Workplaces Toolkit*, 2023. "What Is Trauma-Informed Coaching?" Trauma Informed Coaching Institute, accessed February 23, 2026.

²¹ Geoffrey Hayes et al., "Gender-Based Violence in Fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region," Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme, 2023.

²² Niusila Fa'avae, *The Effect of the Glass Ceiling on Pacific Island Women in New Zealand Organisations* (master's thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2012).

²³ Marilyn Cornelius, *Becoming Bulletproof: Protecting Yourself from Narcissistic Abuse* (Suva, Fiji: Alchemus Prime, 2025). Also see Stefanie Braun et al., "Leader Narcissism and Outcomes in Organizations," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 773.



against injustice. Fixed-term appointments for leadership positions could ensure toxic leaders do not control organisations for long periods.²⁴ Another model that might work well is feminist co-leadership, in which two leaders intentionally share power, collaboratively make decisions, and disrupt patriarchal and other oppressive systems by modeling integrity, trust, care, and compassion,²⁵ but even these models can create suffering if one leader is abusive and unwilling or unable to change. Ultimately, if we are to achieve Pacific development goals, we must do the complex inner work needed to heal our past, intentionally improve our professional conduct, and nurture healthy Pacific workplaces that can become hubs of innovation and compassion.²⁶

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²⁴ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent: Implementation Plan 2023–2030* (Suva, Fiji: PIFS, 2023), sections on governance and accountable institutions.

²⁵ Christy Selica Alves Nascimento, *Literature Review on Co-Leadership Models* (Feminist Co-Leadership Project, 2022). *Mosaics & Mirrors: Insights and Practices of Feminist Co-Leadership* (Association for Progressive Communications, 2022).

²⁶ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *REPORT: 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, Fiji: PIFS, 2022), especially the vision for people-centered development and strong institutions.