

Understanding Organizational Culture Killers: A Conceptual Model of Leadership and Organizational Failures

Faidzulaini Muhammad^{1*}, Zulkiffly Baharom¹, Wan Maryam Jameelah Wan Alias²

¹Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz School of Accountancy (TISSA-UUM), College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

²Islamic Business School, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100514>

Received: 31 January 2026; Accepted: 05 February 2026; Published: 16 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Organizational culture is widely recognized as a vital driver of long-term performance and innovation, yet many organizations remain plagued by toxic, disengaged, and ethically compromised environments. This conceptual article addresses a critical gap in the literature by shifting the discourse from a construction-centric to a destruction-aware perspective. It synthesizes contemporary research to propose an integrative model of “organizational culture killers”, active, synergistic processes that erode cultural health. These are categorized into leadership-activated failures (destructive leadership, lack of psychological safety) and organizationally embedded failures (misaligned human resource (HR) architectures, symbolic/perk-centered culture, toxic positivity). Grounded in social exchange theory, psychological safety theory, and agency-institutional theories, the model explains how these killers systematically degrade trust, voice, and value integrity. A key theoretical proposition is that organizational trust moderates the destructive impact of organizational trust. The analysis yields five testable propositions to guide future research and derives urgent practical implications. It argues that leaders and HR must proactively audit for and dismantle these killers, reframing cultural stewardship as a core governance and risk-mitigation imperative essential to ethical and sustainable performance.

Keywords: Organizational culture, Organizational culture killers, Destructive leadership, Psychological safety, Organizational trust

INTRODUCTION

Organizational culture, often characterized as the social glue that unites collectives and functions as a guiding compass for behavior, is widely recognized as a vital factor influencing long-term performance, innovation, and sustainability (Schein, 2010). In modern practice, it has evolved beyond its anthropological origins to become a fundamental component of strategic human resource management and leadership discourse. Corporations allocate substantial resources to employer branding, values workshops, and cultural transformation initiatives to foster environments that attract talent, promote engagement, and secure competitive advantage (Wijaya et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this strategic focus contrasts sharply with a persistent and troubling reality: the widespread presence of toxic, fearful, disengaged, and ethically compromised organizational settings. High-profile scandals, widespread employee burnout, and legal actions related to toxic workplaces highlight a systemic issue in which intended cultural values significantly diverge from lived experiences (Ronnie, 2024; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020).

This paradox exposes a notable gap in both scholarly investigation and managerial application. The academic literature concerning organizational culture has predominantly focused on a constructive paradigm. Extensive research has elucidated how transformational leadership, shared values, and strategic HR alignment cultivate positive organizational climates (Lee et al., 2024; Rehman et al., 2019). Conversely, our understanding of the processes by which cultures deteriorate or are intentionally dismantled remains fragmented and under-theorized. Dysfunctional phenomena are frequently examined in isolation, such as abusive supervision, turnover intentions,

or silent cultures, lacking integration into a comprehensive framework that explicates their function as systemic “culture killers” (Jantjies & Botha, 2024; Montgomery et al., 2023). This disjointed approach risks addressing merely symptoms (e.g., low morale) without diagnosing the fundamental pathology: a failure of leadership and organizational systems that sustains cultural decline.

This article posits that advancing the field requires a deliberate shift from a construction-centric to a destruction-aware perspective. We argue that “culture killers” are not merely the absence of positive attributes, but active, often synergistic processes of degradation. These processes operate through two primary, reinforcing channels:

1. Leadership-activated failures: Where the behaviors and styles of those in authority directly poison trust, safety, and fairness (Hassanein et al., 2025; Hubbard, 2024).
2. Organizationally embedded failures: Where misaligned systems, symbolic practices, and institutionalized norms create structures that suffocate psychological safety and integrity (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025; Ghafoori et al., 2023).

The proposed conceptual model is grounded in established yet highly relevant theories. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains how destructive leadership undermines reciprocity and trust, thereby breaching the psychological contract (Yang et al., 2024). Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999) is essential for understanding how fear-based management and accountability failures suppress employee voice, stifle learning, and kill innovation, a link strongly supported by recent empirical work (Santos et al., 2025; Figueiredo et al., 2025). Furthermore, institutional and agency theory lenses help clarify how HR practices focused on “culture fit” or superficial perks create symbolic cultures that decouple stated values from lived realities, prioritizing compliance and optics over genuine ethical conduct and adaptability (Gretton-Watson et al., 2025; Batra & Kaur, 2024).

Consequently, the purpose of this conceptual article is threefold. First, it synthesizes contemporary research (post-2020) on leadership and organizational dysfunction to propose an integrative model of organizational culture killers. Second, it delineates the key mechanisms, including destructive leadership, the annihilation of psychological safety, toxic positivity, accountability failure, misaligned HR architectures, and symbolic culture, through which these killers systematically degrade cultural effectiveness. Third, it advances a set of testable propositions to guide future empirical research and derives critical implications for leaders, HR professionals, and policymakers who steward ethical and sustainable organizational environments.

By examining the anatomy of cultural destruction with the same rigor applied to its construction, this article provides a necessary corrective. It contends that enduring organizational health requires not only the vision to build but also the vigilance to identify, understand, and disarm the very forces that threaten to tear culture apart from within. The following sections elaborate on this framework, offering a roadmap for research and a sobering mirror for practice.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: FOUNDATIONS AND THE IMPERATIVE OF CULTURAL HEALTH

Defining Organizational Culture: From Espoused Values to Enacted Realities

Organizational culture remains one of the most pivotal yet elusive constructs in management studies. Moving beyond simplistic checklists of values or compendiums of employee perks, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes it as the complex, socially constructed system of shared assumptions, beliefs, and norms that ultimately governs “the way things are done around here” (Schein, 2010). This system operates across three fundamental, interdependent levels: (1) visible artifacts (structures, processes, language); (2) espoused values (strategic goals, stated philosophies); and, most critically, (3) underlying, often unconscious basic assumptions that guide perception, thought, and feeling. It is this deepest level of shared assumptions, about truth, time, human nature, relationships, and activity, that forms the resilient core of an organization’s identity and behavioral compass.

A critical distinction for analyzing cultural health is the frequent decoupling between espoused values (the professed culture) and enacted values (the culture-in-practice) (Hubbart, 2024). An organization may champion “psychological safety” and “innovation” in its official rhetoric, yet its daily practices, such as punishing dissent, favoring sycophancy, or promoting based on loyalty over competence, reveal a contrary, enacted culture of fear and conformity (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025; Montgomery et al., 2023). This gap is not merely hypocritical; it represents a fundamental failure of cultural integrity that erodes trust and breeds cynicism. Therefore, a robust organizational culture is characterized not by the elegance of its value statements but by the alignment of its artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions into a coherent, lived reality that guides consistent behavior (Lee et al., 2024).

The Strategic and Human Cost of Cultural Effectiveness

The imperative to cultivate an effective culture is driven by its demonstrable impact on both strategic objectives and human outcomes. An effective culture, one that is adaptive, coherent, and positively enacted, serves as a critical strategic asset. It is a primary mechanism for executing strategy and shaping the myriad daily decisions and actions of employees without requiring direct oversight (Wijaya et al., 2025). For instance, a culture that genuinely values learning and psychological safety enables rapid organizational adaptation and innovation, as seen in studies linking such environments to greater knowledge sharing, error reporting, and creative problem-solving (Figueiredo et al., 2025; Santos et al., 2025). Conversely, a dysfunctional culture becomes a strategic liability, stifling the very capabilities needed for competitiveness and resilience.

The human costs of cultural failure are profound and well-documented. Toxic cultural elements, such as those fostered by destructive leadership and misaligned systems, directly erode employee well-being, engagement, and retention. Research consistently shows that environments lacking trust, fairness, and safety heighten burnout, disengagement, and turnover intentions (Jantjies & Botha, 2024; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). For example, Ghio and Moulang (2025) found that, for women accountants, psychological safety and a supportive culture were crucial resources for well-being, buffering against burnout. Furthermore, a culture that suppresses voice and normalizes incivility not only harms individuals but also degrades collective performance by impeding communication, collaboration, and ethical conduct (Hassanein et al., 2025; Joseph & Shetty, 2022). In essence, the health of an organization’s culture is inextricably linked to the health of its people and the sustainability of its performance, making its preservation a paramount leadership responsibility.

THEORETICAL ANCHORS AND LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

A robust conceptualization of organizational culture killers requires grounding in established theoretical frameworks that explain the mechanisms of cultural formation, maintenance, and erosion. This section synthesizes three pivotal theoretical perspectives, Social Exchange Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, and the complementary lenses of Agency and Institutional Theory, to provide the explanatory foundation for the proposed model. These theories illuminate the relational, psychological, and systemic processes through which leadership and organizational failures actively degrade cultural health.

Social Exchange and Breach: The Currency of Trust and Reciprocity

Social Exchange Theory (SET) holds that workplace relationships are governed by norms of reciprocity (Blau, 1964). This theory remains a cornerstone for understanding workplace relationships and has been widely applied to explain trust, citizenship behavior, and leadership dynamics in contemporary organizations (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The psychological contract, the unwritten, subjective set of expectations employees hold regarding what they will give and receive from their organization, is the central vehicle of this social exchange (Rousseau, 1995). A healthy organizational culture, in essence, is a repository of strong, positive psychological contracts in which mutual obligations (e.g., effort for respect, loyalty for support) are perceived as balanced and fair.

Culture killers undermine the organization by repeatedly violating reciprocity norms, thereby breaking the psychological contract. Harmful leadership behaviors such as exploitation, inconsistency, and public shaming severely undermine the trust and respect employees expect in exchange for their efforts (Hassanein et al., 2025).

This breach indicates that the social exchange is unfair, causing employees to shift from voluntary commitment to either compliance driven by self-interest or active withdrawal (Yang et al., 2024). If these breaches are common and unaddressed, they weaken the organization's social cohesion, replacing collaborative norms with transactional cynicism and distrust (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). These factors are characteristic of the toxic culture fostered by culture killers.

Psychological Safety: The Bedrock of Voice, Learning, and Innovation

While Social Exchange Theory explains the relational breakdown, Psychological Safety Theory explains the silencing of the organization's cognitive and corrective capacities. Defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, psychological safety enables individuals to speak up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation (Edmondson, 1999). It is a critical precursor to learning behaviors, innovation, and error management.

A lack of psychological safety is not merely an absence of comfort; it is a culture killer engineered by specific leadership and systemic failures. Authoritarian, fear-based leadership directly undermines psychological safety by punishing dissent and rewarding conformity (Hubbart, 2024; Zhang et al., 2021). This creates a climate of employee silence, in which critical information about problems, risks, or unethical conduct is withheld. In a healthcare context, Montgomery et al. (2023) argue that overcoming dysfunctional silence requires moving beyond simplistic notions of psychological safety to address deeper professional and organizational cultures that suppress voice. The consequences are severe: without safety, errors are hidden, learning is stifled, and innovation is extinguished. Conversely, leadership that fosters safety, such as humble leadership that acknowledges its own fallibility, creates the conditions for crucial processes such as error disclosure and knowledge sharing, which are vital to a learning culture (Santos et al., 2025; Figueiredo et al., 2025).

AGENCY AND INSTITUTIONAL THEORIES: SYSTEMS, ACCOUNTABILITY AND SYMBOLIC DECOUPLING

Social Exchange and Psychological Safety Theories primarily address interpersonal and team-level dynamics. To explain how culture killers become institutionalized, we turn to Agency Theory and Institutional Theory. Agency Theory focuses on conflicts that arise when one party (the principal, e.g., shareholders/the organization) delegates work to another (the agent, e.g., managers/employees) whose interests may not align. It highlights moral hazard and opportunism, typically addressed through monitoring and incentive alignment.

In the context of culture, misaligned HR architectures are quintessential failures of agency. When promotion systems reward short-term financial results at any cost, or when "culture-fit" hiring prioritizes subservience over competence, the formal incentive structure actively encourages behaviors that erode long-term cultural health (e.g., cutting ethical corners, suppressing bad news). This misalignment creates systemic accountability failure, in which harmful conduct is tolerated if it delivers targets, decoupling ethical standards from performance management (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025).

Institutional Theory complements this by explaining why organizations often adopt structures for legitimacy rather than efficiency, a process known as symbolic decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), in which formal structures buffer internal activities from external scrutiny to maintain legitimacy. Contemporary research continues to elaborate on how this decoupling manifests in corporate social responsibility reporting, employer branding, and diversity initiatives (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). A perk-centered or symbolic culture is a prime example. Organizations may adopt trendy values (e.g., "innovation", "wellbeing") and surface-level artifacts (e.g., ping-pong tables, mindfulness apps) to project a modern, attractive image.

However, if these are decoupled from the underlying assumptions and enacted practices (e.g., punishing risk-takers, overloading employees), they create a culture of cynicism and distrust. Employees perceive the hypocrisy, which erodes cultural integrity. Recent research on governance underscores this, showing that weak oversight and inconsistent rule application (a form of decoupling) enable toxic behaviors like bullying to persist because formal policies are disconnected from daily practice (Gretton-Watson et al., 2025). Similarly, efforts to

measure complex cultural constructs, such as risk culture, highlight the challenge of moving from symbolic gestures to embedded, measurable practices (Ghafoori et al., 2023).

Together, these three theoretical anchors provide a multilevel explanation: Social Exchange Theory explains relational betrayal that destroys trust; Psychological Safety Theory explains the silencing of collective intelligence; and Agency/Institutional Theories explain how systems and symbols can be structured to perpetuate rather than prevent cultural decay. This synthesis forms the logical foundation for the integrated conceptual model presented in the following section.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF CULTURE KILLERS

Core Premise: Culture Erosion as a Synergy of Leadership and System Failures

Building on the theoretical foundations established in Section 3, this paper proposes that the erosion of organizational culture's effectiveness is not a random or passive event. It is an active process catalyzed by a synergistic interplay between leadership-activated failures and organizationally embedded failures. These "culture killers" operate through distinct yet mutually reinforcing pathways to degrade the shared assumptions, behavioral norms, and relational trust that constitute a healthy culture. The proposed model posits that the negative impact of these killers on cultural effectiveness is not uniform; it is significantly attenuated or amplified by the prevailing level of Organizational Trust, which serves as a critical contextual moderator.

Presentation and Description of the Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1. It illustrates the hypothesized relationships between five primary antecedent variables, the culture killers, and the dependent variable, Organizational Culture Effectiveness. The model further proposes that Organizational Trust moderates the strength of each direct relationship between the killers and cultural effectiveness.

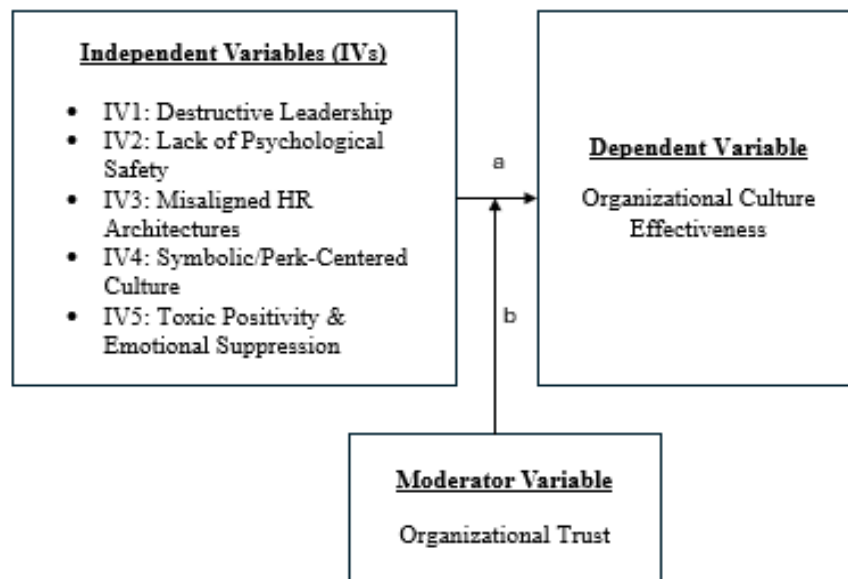
As depicted, the framework organizes the five culture killers into two interdependent clusters:

- **Leadership-Activated Killers:** Destructive Leadership and Lack of Psychological Safety. These represent failures directly enacted by those in authority, which poison the relational and psychological climate.
- **Organizationally-Embedded Killers:** Misaligned HR Architectures, Symbolic/Perk-Centered Culture, and Toxic Positivity & Emotional Suppression. These represent failures institutionalized in systems and norms, which perpetuate dysfunction beyond individual leaders.

The arrows from the killer clusters to Organizational Culture Effectiveness (Path 'a' in Figure 1) represent the proposed direct, negative effects. The model posits that these clusters are synergistic; for example, destructive leadership often fosters toxic positivity and sponsors misaligned HR practices.

Critically, the framework specifies that Organizational Trust (Path 'b') acts as a contextual moderator. It is hypothesized to attenuate (buffer) the destructive impact of each culture killer when trust is high, and to amplify it when trust is low. This moderating role underscores that the erosion of culture is not deterministic but is filtered through the organization's existing reservoir of social and relational capital.

Figure 1. An Integrative Conceptual Model of Organizational Culture Killers



Defining the “Culture Killer”: Interdependent Paths of Destruction

The variables in the model are listed in Table 1. The selection of these five specific killers is based on their recurring prominence in recent literature (2020-2025) as primary sources of cultural degradation. They are conceptualized as “killers” because they actively attack the core components of a healthy culture: trust (Social Exchange Theory), voice and learning (Psychological Safety Theory), and integrity between stated and enacted values (Agency/Institutional Theories).

Table 1: Summary of Model Variables

Variable	Type	Definition (Based on Literature Synthesis)	Key Supporting Citations (2020-2025)
Organizational Culture Effectiveness	Dependent Variable (DV)	The extent to which an organization’s enacted culture is coherent, adaptive, and positively aligned with its espoused values, thereby enabling strategic execution and sustainable employee well-being.	Wijaya et al. (2025); Lee et al. (2024)
Destructive Leadership	Independent Variable (IV1)	Supervisor behaviors that are hostile, manipulative, and self-serving, and that undermine followers’ well-being and organizational goals. Encompasses toxic, abusive, and authoritarian styles.	Hassanein et al. (2025); Jantjies & Botha (2024); Hubbard (2024)
Lack of Psychological Safety	Independent Variable (IV2)	A shared team/organizational belief that it is unsafe to take interpersonal risks, such as speaking up with ideas, questions, or concerns, or admitting errors.	Montgomery et al. (2023); Santos et al. (2025)
Misaligned HR Architectures	Independent Variable (IV3)	Formal HR systems (recruitment, promotion, appraisal) that incentivize behaviors contradictory to espoused cultural values (e.g., rewarding short-term results over ethics, “culture-fit” hiring that breeds homogeneity).	Panneerselvam & Balaraman (2025); Gretton-Watson et al. (2025)

Symbolic/Perk-Centered Culture	Independent Variable (IV4)	An organizational emphasis on surface-level artifacts and benefits (e.g., trendy offices, slogans) that are decoupled from and substitute for meaningful, enacted values and substantive working conditions.	Brownell (1990); Delmas & Burbano (2011); Ghafoori et al. (2023)
Toxic Positivity & Emotional Suppression	Independent Variable (IV5)	A normative demand for forced optimism and the invalidation or punishment of authentic negative emotions, critical feedback, or discussions of problems.	Panneerselvam & Balaraman (2025)
Organizational Trust	Moderator Variable	The collective, generalized perception held by employees that the organization and its leadership are benevolent, reliable, competent, and honest.	Yang et al. (2024); Joo et al. (2023)

Table 2 synthesizes the conceptual model, explicitly linking each culture killer to its foundational theory, core destructive mechanism, and anticipated outcome on organizational culture. It clarifies the pathways of erosion and the moderating role of trust as proposed in Figure 1.

Table 2: Theoretical Linkages of Organizational Culture Killers

Culture Killer	Primary Theoretical Anchor	Core Destructive Mechanism	Likely Cultural Outcome
Destructive Leadership	Social Exchange Theory	Violates norms of reciprocity, breaches the psychological contract, and erodes trust.	Culture of cynicism, fear, and transactional compliance.
Lack of Psychological Safety	Psychological Safety Theory	Suppresses interpersonal risk-taking, silences voices, impedes error reporting, and impairs learning.	Brittle, silent culture incapable of adaptation or innovation.
Misaligned HR Architectures	Agency Theory	Incentivizes behaviors (via rewards/promotion) that contradict espoused values, creating accountability failure.	Culture of impunity and cynicism; decoupling of ethics from performance.
Symbolic/Perk-Centered Culture	Institutional Theory	Creates symbolic decoupling; surface-level artifacts substitute for substantive values, fostering perceived hypocrisy.	Culture of inauthenticity and distrust; erosion of cultural integrity.
Toxic Positivity & Emotional Suppression	Psychological Safety Theory	Invalidates authentic experience and blocks critical feedback, forbidding acknowledgment of problems.	Fragile culture of collective delusion, hindering problem-solving and resilience.
Moderator: Organizational Trust	Social Exchange Theory	Acts as a buffer (if high) or amplifier (if low) for the destructive impact of all killers above.	Determines the rate and severity of cultural erosion.

This framework provides a concise yet thorough overview of how individual failures collectively erode organizational culture. The next section will critically examine the mechanisms of each harmful factor and develop formal propositions based on this model.

THE ANATOMY OF CULTURE KILLERS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This section provides a critical analysis of the five culture killers outlined in the conceptual framework. It synthesizes contemporary empirical literature to elucidate the specific mechanisms through which each killer erodes the effectiveness of organizational culture.

Leadership-Activated Killers

Leadership is not merely an influencer of culture; it is its primary architect and daily reinforcer. When leaders exhibit destructive behavior or foster a climate of fear, they act as direct, potent agents of cultural decay.

Destructive and Toxic Leadership: The Corrosion of Trust and Fairness

Destructive leadership encompasses overtly hostile behaviors (e.g., bullying, humiliation) or covertly manipulative ones (e.g., favoritism, gaslighting), ultimately undermining organizational goals and follower well-being (Manley et al., 2016). Toxic leadership, a prevalent subset, is characterized by self-centeredness, unpredictability, and a corrosive impact on the ethical climate. The mechanism of this killer is rooted in a profound violation of Social Exchange Theory. Leaders who are abusive or exploitative shatter the norm of reciprocity, breaching the psychological contract that effort and loyalty will be met with respect and support (Hassanein et al., 2025).

Empirical evidence demonstrates the cascading effects. Jantjies and Botha (2024) found that toxic leadership directly increased turnover intention, with organizational culture mediating this relationship, indicating that the leader's toxicity becomes embedded in the cultural fabric. Similarly, destructive leadership fosters compulsory citizenship behavior, in which employees engage in helping behaviors out of fear and pressure rather than goodwill, further eroding authentic cultural norms (Zhao et al., 2013). The killer's potency lies in its dual effect: it directly harms victims while simultaneously modeling and sanctioning incivility and self-interest as acceptable cultural norms, thereby contributing to a systemic decline in trust, fairness, and collective commitment (Paltu & Brouwers, 2020).

Fear-Based Control and the Annihilation of Psychological Safety

Authoritarian, fear-based leadership styles kill culture by systematically eroding psychological safety. This involves leaders asserting absolute control, suppressing dissent, and using intimidation to ensure compliance (Zhang et al., 2021). The mechanism is the strategic induction of fear, which directly suppresses interpersonal risk-taking essential for learning and innovation (Edmondson, 1999).

Recent studies in high-stakes environments highlight this dynamic. In healthcare, Montgomery et al. (2023) reframe employee silence not only as an individual choice but also as a culturally embedded outcome, often stemming from hierarchical leadership that penalizes speaking up. The result is a "silent culture" in which errors are concealed, and improvement is impossible. Conversely, research shows that leadership that actively builds psychological safety, such as humble leadership that admits its own limitations, creates the conditions for critical behaviors like error disclosure, which are foundational to a learning culture (Santos et al., 2025; Figueiredo et al., 2025). When fear prevails, the culture becomes brittle, incapable of adaptation or honest self-assessment, as information flow is deliberately constrained by members' survival instincts.

Organizationally-Embedded Killers

While leadership-activated killers provide the initial catalyst, organizationally-embedded killers ensure the metastasis and persistence of cultural dysfunction. These systemic and normative structures often originate from historical leadership decisions but become institutionalized through formal policies, routines, and social norms.

This institutionalization grants them inertia, allowing toxic patterns to endure beyond the tenure of any single destructive leader. Consequently, embedded killers function as both the legacy of past leadership failures and the architecture sustaining cultural decline, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to disrupt without deliberate systemic intervention.

Beyond individual leaders, culture is killed by systems and norms that institutionalize dysfunction. These embedded killers ensure that toxicity persists beyond any single leader's tenure.

Misaligned HR Architectures: From “Culture Fit” to Accountability Failure

Formal HR systems are powerful levers for embedding cultural values in practice. When these systems are misaligned, they become engines of cultural degradation. Two primary failures are evident. First, misuse of “culture fit” in recruitment often devolves into homophily, hiring people who think, look, and behave like existing members, which stifles diversity of thought and reinforces groupthink (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025). Second, and more pernicious, is a failure of accountability in performance management, in which high performers are shielded from consequences for unethical behavior, or in which metrics incentivize cutthroat competition over collaboration.

This killer operates through the lens of Agency Theory, in which misaligned incentives (the agent's personal gain) conflict with the principal's long-term interest (a healthy, sustainable culture). Gretton-Watson et al. (2025), in a study of the systemic drivers of bullying in surgery, identify fragmented governance and weak accountability as key enablers that allow harmful conduct to persist unaddressed. Such systems signal that the organization's espoused values (e.g., “respect”, “teamwork”) are negotiable, creating a culture of impunity for some and cynicism for all. Consider a firm that espouses “integrity” and “teamwork” but bases year-end bonuses and promotions solely on individual sales figures, regardless of how they are achieved. This directly incentivizes cutthroat competition, withholding information from colleagues, and potentially unethical sales tactics, thereby undermining the collaborative, ethical culture it claims to value.

Symbolic and Perk-Centered Cultures: The Substitution of Substance for Spectacle

A culture-killer that thrives on superficiality is the symbolic or perk-centered culture. Here, management invests heavily in the visible artifacts of a “great workplace”, fancy offices, free meals, and branded merchandise, while neglecting or even contradicting the deeper, fundamental assumptions needed for a healthy culture, such as fair pay, reasonable workloads, and authentic respect (Brownell, 1990). This is a classic case of symbolic decoupling in Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), in which structures are adopted for legitimacy rather than efficiency. In contemporary contexts, this decoupling is often evident in organizations that rhetorically promote wellness or innovation while maintaining high-stress, risk-averse practices (e.g., Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The mechanism is perceived hypocrisy and value substitution. Employees quickly discern that the perks are a facade masking underlying issues such as burnout, inequity, or a lack of strategic direction. Ghafoori et al. (2023), in developing a measure for risk culture in finance, implicitly highlight this by moving beyond superficial compliance to assess deeper factors such as management commitment and psychological safety. When employees see a ping-pong table in a break room but face relentless pressure to work 80-hour weeks, the cultural message is that their well-being is a performative narrative rather than a genuine value. This erodes trust and authenticity, core components of cultural effectiveness. A classic example is a company that invests in lavish office amenities (e.g., nap pods, game rooms) and publicly champions “work-life balance” while simultaneously enforcing a culture of constant connectivity, expecting employees to respond to emails late into the night and on weekends. The perks become a cynical substitute for genuine respect for personal time.

Toxic Positivity and Emotional Suppression: The Invalidation of Lived Experience

A more insidious and normatively enforced killer is the culture of toxic positivity. This institutionalized mandate to maintain a façade of constant optimism labels expressions of doubt, stress, or constructive criticism as “negativity” and discourages them (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025). It is often coupled with emotional

suppression, in which employees are expected to manage and hide any emotions deemed inconvenient (e.g., frustration, grief).

This killer's mechanism is the invalidation of authentic human experience and the blocking of critical feedback loops. It creates a culture where problems cannot be honestly acknowledged or addressed because the first step, admitting they exist, is forbidden. This is profoundly damaging to psychological safety and learning. If a team member cannot say, "This process is failing", without being accused of having a bad attitude, the process will never improve.

It forces a collective delusion, undermining the very reality-testing function a healthy culture must perform. For example, in an organization that mandates toxic positivity, an employee raising a concern about an unsustainable deadline might be told to "just be more optimistic" or "see it as a challenge", rather than have the workload examined. This invalidates the legitimate stress and prevents the systemic issue from being addressed. Over time, this leads to widespread emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and a fragile culture that is unable to grapple with the complex challenges it faces.

PROPOSITIONS FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

The conceptual framework and critical analysis presented in earlier sections yield a set of testable propositions. These hypotheses specify the expected relationships among the identified culture killers, the moderating effect of organizational trust, and the decline in cultural effectiveness. They are designed to steer future empirical studies to confirm and improve the proposed model.

Direct Effects of Leadership-Activated Killers

Actions and atmospheres shaped by those in authority are the greatest immediate risks to cultural integrity. Building on the concepts of social exchange breach and the destruction of psychological safety, we suggest:

- **P1:** Destructive leadership is negatively associated with organizational culture effectiveness.

Leaders who exhibit toxic, abusive, or authoritarian behavior violate norms of reciprocity and trust, modeling and sanctioning self-interest and incivility as cultural norms, thereby directly corroding the culture's coherence and ethical foundation (Hassanein et al., 2025; Jantjies & Botha, 2024).

- **P2:** A pervasive lack of psychological safety is negatively associated with organizational culture effectiveness.

When fear of interpersonal risk-taking dominates the climate, employee voice and error disclosure are suppressed. This stifles learning, innovation, and authentic communication, rendering the culture brittle and incapable of adaptation or honest self-assessment (Montgomery et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2025).

Direct Effects of Organizationally-Embedded Killers

Beyond individual leaders, systemic and normative structures institutionalize dysfunction, ensuring its persistence. Grounded in the theories of agency failure and symbolic decoupling, we propose:

- **P3:** Misaligned HR architectures are negatively associated with organizational culture effectiveness.

Formal systems that prioritize "culture fit" over diversity of thought, or that reward outcomes achieved through unethical means, create incentives that are contradictory to espoused values. This leads to accountability failure and a culture of impunity and cynicism (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025; Gretton-Watson et al., 2025).

- **P4:** A symbolic, perk-centered culture is negatively associated with organizational culture effectiveness.

When surface-level artifacts and benefits are decoupled from substantive working conditions and core values, they foster perceptions of hypocrisy and inauthenticity. This erodes trust and signals that cultural management is a performative exercise rather than a genuine commitment (Brownell, 1990; Ghafoori et al., 2023).

- **P5:** A norm of toxic positivity and emotional suppression is negatively associated with organizational culture effectiveness.

Mandating forced optimism and invalidating negative emotions block critical feedback loops and prevent honest acknowledgment of problems. This fosters a collective delusion, undermining psychological safety and the culture's capacity for reality testing and resilience.

The Moderating Role of Organizational Trust

The model posits that the damage inflicted by these culture killers is not inevitable. A reservoir of collective trust can serve as a buffer. Drawing from the fundamental principle of social exchange that trust mitigates the impact of negative events, we propose:

- **P6:** Organizational trust moderates the negative relationships between culture killers and organizational culture effectiveness, such that these relationships are weaker when organizational trust is high and stronger when it is low.

High organizational trust, the generalized belief in the entity's goodwill and reliability, provides a "relational assurance" that can attenuate the destructive impact of a toxic leader or a misaligned policy. Employees in high-trust environments may attribute negative events to isolated factors rather than systemic malevolence, preserving the overall cultural fabric. Conversely, in low-trust environments, any negative event reinforces the prevailing belief that the organization is fundamentally unsound, thereby accelerating cultural decay (Yang et al., 2024; Joo et al., 2023).

These propositions establish a direct research pathway from the conceptual model. They move the discourse from theoretical critique to empirical investigation, calling for studies that quantify these relationships and test the critical buffering effect of organizational trust. The following discussion section elaborates on the broader implications of this agenda for theory and practice.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The proposed conceptual model of organizational culture killers presents a paradigm shift from a construction-centric to a destruction-aware perspective on cultural management. By synthesizing leadership and organizational systems failures into an integrated framework, this article offers a more comprehensive diagnostic lens for understanding why cultures fail. This final discussion elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications stemming from this reconceptualization.

Theoretical Contributions: Reorienting the Discourse from Construction to Destruction

The primary theoretical contribution of this work is its systematic articulation of organizational culture erosion as an active, multi-pathway process. While scholars have extensively cataloged the elements of positive culture, toxic subcultures are often studied as isolated phenomena, as outcomes of "bad apples" or specific policy failures. This model integrates these fragments, demonstrating that cultural destruction operates through a reinforcing synergy between *agency* (destructive leadership) and *structure* (misaligned systems). It thus answers calls for more integrative frameworks that bridge micro-level leadership behaviors with macro-level organizational architectures (Wijaya et al., 2025).

Second, the model elevates psychological safety from a team-level dynamic to a cornerstone of organizational cultural health. Our synthesis frames the absence of psychological safety not merely as a symptom but as a core culture killer in its own right, one that is both activated by leadership and embedded in norms such as toxic

positivity. This aligns with and extends the recent literature that frames employee silence as a cultural outcome requiring systemic, rather than merely interpersonal, intervention (Montgomery et al., 2023).

Third, the formal introduction of organizational trust as a moderator provides a crucial contingency in the model. It posits that the impact of culture killers is not deterministic but is mediated by the organization's existing reservoir of relational assurance. This moderating pathway offers a theoretical explanation for why similar toxic behaviors can lead to rapid cultural collapse in one organization while causing only localized damage in another, more resilient organization. It integrates the central tenets of Social Exchange Theory directly into the prognosis of cultural failure.

Practical Imperatives: Diagnosis, Intervention, and Stewardship for Leaders and HR

For practitioners, this framework serves as both a diagnostic toolkit and a guide for preventive stewardship. Leaders and HR professionals must move beyond surveying for the presence of positive attributes and actively audit for the six culture killers.

- 1. Leadership Accountability and Development:** Organizations must implement robust, multi-rater (360-degree) feedback systems that specifically assess leadership behaviors related to toxicity, authoritarianism, and the cultivation of psychological safety (Hubbart, 2024). Development programs should move beyond teaching "how to build culture" to include modules on "how not to destroy it", emphasizing emotional intelligence, humble leadership, and the creation of climates for voice (Santos et al., 2025).
- 2. Auditing and Aligning Organizational Systems:** HR must conduct forensic reviews of its architectures. This includes scrutinizing hiring criteria for biased interpretations of "culture fit", ensuring that performance and promotion systems genuinely reward ethical and collaborative behavior, and creating transparent, non-punitive accountability mechanisms (Panneerselvam & Balaraman, 2025; Gretton-Watson et al., 2025). The goal is to ensure that systems incentivize the enactment of espoused values.
- 3. Fostering Authentic Communication and Trust:** Combating symbolic culture and toxic positivity requires leadership to model vulnerability and authentic communication. This means leaders must share bad news, acknowledge failures, and create formal channels through which dissent and concerns can be raised safely, without fear of retribution or being labeled "negative" (Figueiredo et al., 2025). Building organizational trust is not an abstract goal but a strategic buffer against cultural decay, cultivated through consistent integrity, transparency, and fair process.
- 4. Implementing Managerial Diagnostics and Early Warning Systems.** Proactive stewardship requires tools for early detection. Leaders and HR should integrate diagnostic questions into routine surveys and focus groups that specifically probe for the precursors of culture killers. For example: "*Do you feel safe reporting mistakes or voicing contrary opinions?*" (Psychological Safety); "*Are people rewarded for behaviors that truly match our stated values?*" (HR Alignment); "*When problems arise, are we encouraged to paint a positive picture or to address the root cause?*" (Toxic Positivity). Tracking trends in these metrics can provide an early warning signal of cultural erosion, long before it manifests as turnover or scandal, enabling timely intervention.

A Call for Ethical and Sustainable Organizational Governance

Ultimately, this model underscores that cultural stewardship is a non-delegable, core function of ethical governance. A healthy culture is a prerequisite for sustainable performance and social legitimacy. The persistent presence of culture killers, especially when systemic, signals a failure of governance at the highest levels, including boards of directors, which are responsible for oversight of culture and CEO performance (Ronnie, 2024).

Therefore, this article calls for reframing cultural management as a risk mitigation and sustainability imperative. Just as organizations audit financial and operational risks, they must conduct regular, rigorous cultural risk assessments to identify early warning signs of these killers. This shifts culture from the domain of HR marketing

to the core agenda of strategic risk committees and boards. In an era in which talent, reputation, and social license to operate are paramount, understanding and neutralizing the forces that destroy culture is not merely an academic exercise; it is a fundamental responsibility of ethical and effective leadership.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions of the Model

Although this conceptual model provides an innovative framework for understanding cultural erosion, it is important to recognize its limitations to accurately assess its contribution and direct future studies. As a conceptual piece, the suggested relationships are theoretical and need empirical validation. Developing detailed operational definitions and measurement methods for concepts such as toxic positivity and misaligned HR architectures is necessary to enable rigorous testing.

Second, the model's dynamics may depend on contextual factors not explicitly included. For instance, the national cultural context likely influences both the manifestation of certain killers (e.g., the acceptability of authoritarian leadership in high power-distance cultures) and the strength of organizational trust as a buffer. Industry characteristics also serve as a key boundary condition; the impact of accountability failure in safety-critical sectors such as healthcare or aviation is likely more immediate and severe than in other industries.

Furthermore, the model's dynamics are likely influenced by important contextual contingencies. National cultural dimensions (e.g., high vs. low power distance) could shape both the manifestation of certain killers and the strength of organizational trust as a buffer. For instance, authoritarian leadership (a lack of psychological safety) might be more culturally normative and thus less immediately destabilizing in high power-distance contexts, though its long-term erosive effects may still occur. Similarly, industry type serves as a key boundary condition. The impact of accountability failures or the suppression of voice in a safety-critical industry (e.g., aviation, healthcare) would likely have more immediate and catastrophic consequences than in a less regulated sector. Future research should explicitly test these contingencies.

Finally, the model is primarily framed within the context of for-profit corporations. Its applicability to the public sector, nonprofit organizations, or highly decentralized organizational forms (e.g., platform-based gig economies) may require modification, as governance, accountability, and psychological contract mechanisms differ substantially in these settings. Acknowledging these boundaries does not diminish the model's utility; rather, it clarifies its initial scope and highlights critical avenues for empirical and contextual refinement, as outlined in the following research agenda.

Future Research Directions

The proposed model of organizational culture killers provides a basis for further empirical study and theoretical development. To progress this important research area, future studies should focus on three main directions: (1) empirically testing and refining the model, (2) investigating key contextual factors that might influence its dynamics, and (3) using diverse methods to better understand the complex process of cultural erosion.

Empirical Validation and Model Refinement

The immediate research priority is to operationalize and test the proposed relationships. This requires developing and validating psychometrically sound scales for the core constructs, particularly for the less-established culture killers such as toxic positivity/perk-centered culture and misaligned HR architectures. Although measures for destructive leadership and psychological safety are more mature, research must ensure they are adapted to capture organization-wide, cultural-level perceptions rather than solely individual or team-level experiences.

Future empirical research should adopt multi-level, multi-source designs to test the comprehensive model. Cross-sectional studies across various industries can offer initial evidence for the direct and moderating effects outlined in P1-P6. Nonetheless, validating a model of cultural erosion truly requires longitudinal studies. Monitoring organizations over time can establish causal order, indicating whether culture killers lead to declines in cultural effectiveness and trust, or if a low-trust environment amplifies the perception and impact of these killers. Additionally, research should investigate potential mediation mechanisms. For example, does destructive

leadership initially reduce psychological safety, thereby lowering cultural effectiveness? Exploring these indirect pathways will yield a more detailed understanding of the decay processes.

Exploring Contingencies: Industry, Culture, and Lifecycle Stages

The model's generalizability must be examined across key contextual boundaries. A critical contingency is the industry or sector. The potency of certain culture killers may vary significantly; for example, accountability failures in a highly regulated, safety-critical industry (e.g., aviation, healthcare) may have more immediate, catastrophic cultural and operational consequences than in a less regulated sector (Gretton-Watson et al., 2025). Similarly, national and regional cultural contexts likely influence both the manifestation of killers and the strength of trust as a buffer. Authoritarian leadership might be more culturally normative and thus less immediately damaging in high power-distance cultures, though it may still erode psychological safety in similar ways (Zhang et al., 2021). Cross-cultural comparative studies are essential.

Organizational lifecycle stage presents another vital contingency. Start-ups may be more susceptible to the toxic effects of a single destructive founder-leader, while large, mature bureaucracies might be more vulnerable to the inertia of misaligned HR architectures and symbolic, perk-centered cultures. Additionally, the role of Organizational Trust as a moderator may itself be contingent on factors such as prior reputation or crisis history, warranting further investigation into higher-order interactions.

Methodological Pluralism: Capturing the Phenomenology of Cultural Erosion

To fully understand the lived experience of cultural degradation, the field must move beyond dominant survey methodologies. Qualitative and mixed-methods approaches are indispensable. Ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, and narrative analyses can capture the rich, processual nature of how culture killers become normalized, how silence spreads, and how members rationalize the decoupling of values from practice (Montgomery et al., 2023). Analyzing internal communications, policy documents, and even exit interview data through content analysis can provide objective corroboration of cultural narratives.

Furthermore, social network analysis could illuminate how destructive leadership or a lack of psychological safety affects information flow, coalition formation, and the spread of toxic norms within an organization (Panneerselvam et al., 2025). Although challenging, experimental and quasi-experimental designs could be used to test interventions to mitigate specific culture killers, such as training programs to build psychological safety or restructuring accountability systems.

In conclusion, validating and extending this conceptual model will require a concerted, multi-method research effort. By subjecting the framework to rigorous empirical scrutiny across contexts, scholars can transform it from a diagnostic map into a validated theory of cultural failure, thereby informing more potent and targeted interventions to build organizational resilience.

CONCLUSION

This article addresses a critical gap in the literature by shifting the discourse from a construction-centric to a destruction-aware perspective on organizational culture. We propose that persistent cultural failure stems from identifiable, synergistic "culture killers". Our conceptual model delineates two interconnected paths of erosion: leadership-activated failures (destructive leadership, lack of psychological safety) and organizationally embedded failures (misaligned HR systems, symbolic culture, toxic positivity). The framework further posits that organizational trust moderates the impact of these killers, serving as a crucial buffer that mitigates their destructive effects. By integrating theoretical lenses from social exchange, psychological safety, and agency-institutional theories, this model provides a diagnostic tool for understanding cultural decay as a systemic pathology.

Ultimately, stewarding a healthy culture requires vigilance not only in cultivating positive attributes but also in actively auditing for and dismantling these underlying killers. Recognizing and neutralizing these threats reframes cultural management from an aspirational exercise into a core governance and risk-mitigation

imperative. In an era where cultural integrity is vital to sustainability, innovation, and ethical legitimacy, this threat-aware perspective is fundamental to fostering resilient and responsible organizations.

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