

## ABSTRACT

HARRIS, DUSTIN. The Role of Communication in Creating Toxic or Supportive Nonprofit Work Environments (Under the direction of Jessica Katz Jameson).

Toxic workplace environments have become a much-discussed concept within both scholarly and popular literature. However, the term *toxic* has rarely been used within the communication discipline. Given the impact that negative work environments can have on employees' lives, the goal of this study was to assess recurring communication behaviors that contribute to toxic workplaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 nonprofit employees. Participants were asked to describe what a toxic work environment meant to them and what communication behaviors they had observed within these environments. Similar questions were asked about the opposite of a toxic environment – referred to as a *supportive* environment. Data indicated that *disrespectful*, *inconsistent*, and *insufficient* communication contributed to toxic environments, while *appreciative* and *transparent* communication contributed to supportive environments.

*Keywords:* work environment, toxic, supportive, qualitative, grounded theory

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The Role of Communication in Creating Toxic or Supportive Nonprofit Work Environments

by  
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

Communication

Raleigh, North Carolina

2020

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## **DEDICATION**

To the educators who taught me, both at North Carolina State and beyond. To my mom for being the first of those educators, and to my sister for her support while also going through a master's program. And to Melissa Aslo de la Torre for cooking many meals during this immersive project and for supporting with love and encouragement.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Dustin Harris is a full-time Master of Science student in North Carolina State's Department of Communication. On top of taking classes and working on this thesis, Dustin teaches COM 110 public speaking courses. Prior to enrolling at NC State, Dustin spent a decade working in various educational roles, and he became interested in communication's central role in creating positive or negative work environments (hence, this thesis topic). After graduation, Dustin plans to continue teaching college students. He also plans to engage in communication consulting to help organizations avoid the toxic environments addressed in this manuscript.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, many thanks to the research participants who each gave about an hour of their time to support this project. Second, thank you to my thesis committee. My committee chair, Dr. Jessica Katz Jameson, spent many hours e-mailing and talking to me throughout the last year. I appreciate her guidance and her support as she helped me develop a project that I was interested in. Drs. Joann Keyton and Kami Kosenko also provided excellent feedback during the project development phase and on the final manuscript. Additionally, all three committee members taught me tons about theory, research methods, and academic writing throughout their graduate courses. Finally, thank you to my master's cohort for your support and for providing me with some entertaining study breaks throughout the last two years.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	1
Defining Toxic Work Environments .....	2
Toxic Communication Behaviors .....	3
Bullying.....	3
Inappropriate Humor.....	4
The Role of Leaders.....	4
Dissent, Leader-Member Exchange, and Co-Rumination .....	5
Method .....	6
Sample Recruitment and Description .....	7
Data Collection .....	8
Data Analysis .....	9
Results.....	11
Toxic Work Environment Themes.....	11
Theme #1: Disrespectful Communication .....	12
Controlling Communication .....	12
Critical Communication.....	13
Inconsiderate Communication .....	14
Theme #2: Inconsistent Communication .....	15
Conflicting Communication.....	16
Hypocritical Communication.....	17
Ambiguous Role/Task Communication.....	17
Theme #3: Insufficient Communication .....	18
Supportive Work Environment Themes .....	21
Theme #1: Appreciative Communication.....	21
Affirming Communication.....	22
Investing Communication.....	23
Theme #2: Transparent Communication .....	24
Discussion .....	28
Limitations and Future Research .....	33
Theoretical Implications .....	34
Practitioner Implications.....	35
References.....	37
Appendices.....	42
Appendix A.....	43
Appendix B.....	45

## Introduction

Workplace environments, sometimes referred to as climate (Forward, Czech, & Lee, 2011), are constructed by the communication of organizational members. These environments can have positive or negative impacts on employees in areas such as physical and mental health, work-life balance, job satisfaction, employee engagement, and conflict management. Vickers (2004) vividly illustrated this point by writing that negative work environments can create “‘working wounded,’ people that are left emotionally bereft and unable to connect with their own feelings or sense of self-worth” (pp. 113-114). Given the impact that such climates can have on employees’ personal and professional lives (as well as the organizations themselves), the goal of this study was to assess recurring communication behaviors that contribute to toxic work environments.

## Literature Review

The term *toxic work environment* (also labeled as *toxic workplace*) has been prevalent in the modern lexicon. Popular and scholarly books have been written about toxic workplaces and how employees can combat or survive them (e.g., Durre, 2010; Kusy & Holloway, 2009). More recently, interviewees in a workplace bullying study regularly described their environment as toxic (Pickering, Nurenberg, & Schiamberg, 2017). Goldman (2008) wrote that:

The growing use of the language of toxicity during the past two decades may be attributable to the fact that it conveys a destructive force, a poison, or a dysfunction spreading throughout an environment, a human body, or a human system. (p. 248)

The language people use to describe their experiences “provides not only for the construction of meaning but for the possibility of change” (Thompson, 2010, p. 127). Therefore, examining this



concept of workplace toxicity could prove useful in positively changing the communication that creates these environments.

### **Defining Toxic Work Environments**

Creating a shared understanding of toxic work environments can be difficult since different negative experiences may impact individuals in different ways. Anjum and Xu (2018) wrote that toxic workplace environment is an umbrella term that incorporates four elements: ostracism, bullying, incivility, and harassment. In this definition, ostracism refers to feelings of being left out or excluded; bullying refers to “repeated, unreasonable actions ... intended to intimidate and [create] a risk to the health and safety of employees” (p. 678); incivility refers to negative interpersonal behavior (e.g., making rude or disrespectful comments); harassment refers to unwelcome comments or behavior. Chamberlain and Hodson (2010) indicated that toxic work environments are workplaces where “there are high levels of interpersonal conflict, a lack of worker autonomy, and a high level of disorganization” (p. 455). Repeated negative behaviors is a common theme among toxic work environment definitions, indicating that such environments are typically not the result of a single incident. Participants in the aforementioned Pickering et al. study (2017) mentioned how recurring workplace bullying led them to a loss of trust, which ended up being the salient element of their toxic workplace.

A similar concept to toxic work environments appears in the communication climate literature that began with Gibb’s influential study (1961) and has been expanded upon by contemporary scholars. Gibb defined *defensive climates* as environments that occur “when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in the group” (1961, p. 141). Such environments have communicators whose disconfirming behavior displays judgmental attitudes, inflexibility, and manipulation, among other negative attributes (Forward et al., 2011; Yang, Durbin, &

Rancer, 2017). Conversely, encouragement, empathy, and a free-sharing of information are elements associated with the inverse environments, labeled as *supportive climates* (Forward et al., 2011).

### **Toxic Communication Behaviors**

Gibb's defensive climate concept may have similarities to a toxic environment. However, it is unclear if these terms are completely synonymous. Additionally, most of the literature on the broader toxic workplace concept seems positioned within business and sociology disciplines, indicating a gap in the communication literature. However, communication scholars have studied the more specific behaviors that could contribute to toxic environments, and I will now review a sampling of that work.

Often, a negative work environment can be a result of one individual or a group of individuals communicating in a toxic way. Such individuals may be referred to as primary provokers, and other employees may become secondary provokers if they "actively support the behavior of the primary provoker or actively avoid the primary provoker" (Keyton, 1999, pp. 494-495). Two behaviors that toxic colleagues may engage in are bullying and inappropriate humor. Additionally, toxic leaders or employees' inappropriate or ineffective uses of dissent or co-rumination can create negative work environments.

#### ***Bullying***

Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2011) defined workplace bullying as "repeated and persistent negative actions towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment" (p. 343). More than 90% of adults have experienced workplace bullying, and such behavior can have isolating and silencing effects on recipients (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Workplace bullying can take many forms, including

shouting, physical intimidation, belittling remarks, threats to professional status, and ignoring the bullied target (Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Additionally, employees can “engage in animalistic dehumanization of outgroup members” (Wiener, Gervais, Brnjic, & Nuss, 2014, p. 393), and this dehumanization can be communicated in the workplace between members of different ethnicities, races, sexes, or age groups.

### ***Inappropriate Humor***

Humor can be used in a workplace to increase fun, to reduce stress, and to build camaraderie (Clason, 2019). However, the use of aggressive humor – which typically involves criticism – can have toxic effects. Evans and Steptoe-Warren (2018) discovered that when managers used aggressive humor, “their subordinates reported significantly poorer working environments ... and perceived their managers to be significantly weaker leaders” (p. 451). Jokes have the power to “shame and haze,” and “people can use humor to assert power over others” (Clason, 2019, p. 204). Humor can also turn hostile when it has racial (Hughes, 2019) or sexual connotations. Given the complexity and ambiguity involved with humor, inappropriate jokes often go unaddressed within the workplace because toxic communicators can use the excuse that they were *just joking* (Clason, 2019).

### ***The Role of Leaders***

Because of their high standing within organizational hierarchy, supervisors or executive staff can have “negative but pervasive consequences that trickle down and create a stressful environment” (Winn & Dykes, 2019, p. 38). For example, domineering communication from supervisors can have a negative effect on employee outcomes and can negatively affect employee-supervisor interpersonal relationships. Leaders who exhibit narcissistic behaviors can come across as charismatic and may not initially appear toxic. However, such leaders can be

poor information sharers and can be dismissive of other employees' opinions (Nevicka, Van Vianen, De Hoogh, & Voorn, 2018). Winn and Dykes supported that point by writing that toxic leaders often lack concern for followers and instead think of subordinates as “disposable resource[s]” (2019, p. 40). Conversely, a supervisor's relational messages that illustrate affection, involvement, depth, receptivity, or trust “may help create a positive work environment” (Mikkelson, Hesse, & Sloan, 2017, p. 144).

### ***Dissent, Leader-Member Exchange, and Co-Rumination***

“Organizational dissent is defined as the verbal expression of contradictory opinions and disagreements as well as divergent views about organizational practices, operations, or policies” (Redmond, Jameson, & Binder, 2016, p. 158). Kassing (2009) wrote about three different types of dissent: upward, lateral, and displaced. Upward dissent means that an employee verbalizes their concerns to someone higher in the organizational hierarchy; lateral dissent is when an employee communicates their concerns to their colleagues but not to management; and displaced dissent occurs when employees speak with someone outside of the organization. In general, upward dissent can be the most face-threatening strategy, but also provides the best chance of the issue being addressed since the discourse is directed to people in power (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) provides a related construct by indicating that “supervisors develop differentiated relationships with their subordinates” (Redmond et al., 2016, p. 159), causing certain employees to feel like they are part of a supported “in group” and others to feel like they are part of an ostracized “out group.” Subordinates are more likely to engage in upward dissent if there is open communication with their supervisor and they consider themselves within the in group (Kassing, 2000).

The latter two forms of dissent – lateral and displaced – can create emotional catharsis by allowing employees to voice their concerns (Boren, 2014). However, these types of dissent can also cause dissenters to become frustrated or aggressive since the recipients of the dissent typically do not have the power to improve the situation (Kassing, 2000). Additionally, lateral or displaced dissent could morph into co-rumination, or “excessively discussing personal problems within a dyadic relationship” (Boren, 2014, p. 6). This type of venting can strengthen the relational bond of a dyad, but it can also increase depression, anxiety, or stress.

Again, while the aforementioned behaviors may contribute to a toxic work environment, this is unlikely an exhaustive list. Additionally, it is unclear what communication behaviors are most salient and relevant to people when they specifically label their workplace as toxic.

Therefore, RQ1 asks:

*RQ1:* What types of communication do interviewees describe as contributing to a toxic work environment?

Although the focus of this research project began with toxic work environments, it became clear that people regularly made sense of their experiences by contrasting bad situations with good ones, or worse situations with better ones. Since interviewees were likely to compare toxic environments to more positive environments, RQ2 was added and asks:

*RQ 2:* What types of communication do interviewees describe as contributing to a supportive work environment?

## **Method**

Since the term *toxic work environment* was not directly found in communication literature, a qualitative approach was selected to gather rich, exploratory data that could be used to answer the research questions. I decided to interview nonprofit employees because nonprofits

often face systematic challenges such as being underfunded and understaffed. Additional challenges such as “burnout, compensation constraints, and a lack of advancement opportunities” (Stater & Stater, 2019, p. 495) can lead to high turnover within nonprofits and can make these organizations especially susceptible to toxic work environments. Interviewees were also restricted to nonprofit professionals to reduce variability among participants’ organizations.

### **Sample Recruitment and Description**

Following IRB approval, a study announcement was posted on nine nonprofit-related Facebook groups and one nonprofit Reddit thread throughout September 2019 and October 2019. Additionally, a snowball sampling technique was used by posting the study announcement on my personal Facebook page and encouraging members of my social media network to share the post. The study announcement provided a description of the study, participant eligibility requirements, my contact information, and a web link to a digital interest form. Participants responded to the research call by completing the interest form or emailing me directly. I exchanged emails with the participants to verify eligibility and to confirm a date and time for a 45-minute phone interview.

Seventeen eligible participants completed interviews. Eligible participants were between the ages of 25 and 64, were currently working full-time for a nonprofit, and had worked full-time at that nonprofit for a minimum of two years. A minimum age of 25 was selected with the reasoning that participants may have at least a few years of full-time work experience and would be less likely to confuse toxic environments with the difficulties associated with first entering full-time employment (e.g., learning how to balance a personal life among working 40+ hours). Also, participants were required to have worked for their current employer for a minimum of two years to ensure that they had adequate time to develop a sense of their work environments and to

possibly witness changes within those climates. Although the participants were told that they could speak about any of their nonprofit work experience, current nonprofit employees were solicited to ensure that participants had recent environments to speak about during the interviews.

The range of years that interviewees had worked full-time for their current nonprofit was 2 to 10.5 years, with a mean of 4.97 years. The total range of years that interviewees had worked full-time for nonprofits was 2 to 27 years, with a mean of 8.35 years. Several participants had additional nonprofit experience via part-time or volunteer work. Although additional demographics were not collected, an analysis of the interview data revealed that the participants were working in several different states across the United States. The interviewees also represented diverse types of nonprofits, including nonprofits focused on faith, education, animal care, and social services. Participants represented a range of ages, from 20's to near-retirement age. Interviewees also served in various organizational roles from core staff to executive team members.

### **Data Collection**

Participants engaged in individual, semi-structured phone interviews between September 2019 and January 2020. During the recruitment phase, I recommended to participants that they take the phone call away from their workplace or in a private space because of the nature of the research. All participants signed an electronic consent form prior to participating in the study. For each interview, I was positioned in my home or in a private study room at a North Carolina State library to maintain participant privacy. Each participant was called at the agreed upon time and was asked questions such as:

- When you hear the term toxic work environment, what does that mean to you?

- Can you describe the communication that contributed to this/these toxic environment(s)?
- What does the opposite of a toxic work environment look like to you?

The interview protocol is in Appendix A. Interview questions followed the logical flow of conversation and included probing questions (Tracy, 2013). I recorded and transcribed every interview with permission of the participants. The range of interview lengths was just over 26 minutes to just under 54 minutes, with a mean of 42 minutes. Transcriptions resulted in 234 pages of single-spaced text.

### **Data Analysis**

During a Spring 2019 pre-study, I led a discussion during a graduate-level qualitative research methods class at North Carolina State University. The students were asked to describe what a toxic work environment meant to them. Although nearly every student in the class produced a knowing, emotional response to the term, the students' descriptions of toxic work environments were varied and included examples of racism, controlling supervisors, feeling devalued and ignored, employees not talking about what bothers them, colleagues hoarding information, and constantly feeling the need to perform emotional labor for customers without a space to reveal true emotions (resulting in feelings of inauthenticity). This conversation affirmed that toxic work environment can have different definitions depending on individual experiences. Although defining such environments seemed unlikely, questions remained about whether toxic workplaces had recurring communication that affected them (i.e., RQ1). Additionally, people often assign different definitions to their positive work environments. However, such contrasting environments were labeled as supportive environments throughout this study. I chose this term because *supportive* seemed to best characterize the data when participants were asked to describe the opposite of a toxic environment.



I primarily took an emic approach for this manuscript (Lindlof, 2008). I did not review literature during the data analysis phase so that I could “distance [myself] from the technical literature ... that might block the ability to see new possibilities in the data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 66). While transcribing the first eight interviews, I engaged in open coding (Tracy, 2013) by using an excel sheet to indicate major themes of each interview, including supporting details and relevant participant quotes. Using a constant comparative grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006), a word document was maintained and updated as I identified recurring themes. Saturation became apparent shortly after analyzing the eighth interview, indicating strong consistency within the data. The final nine interviews confirmed the identified themes. Additionally, I sought and analyzed disconfirming evidence within the data to ensure that claims were not being overstated (Tracy, 2013). Once all interviews were transcribed, I read through every transcription in full and highlighted supporting data.

Within the transcriptions, [brackets] were used to provide context or to remove identifiers, and (parentheses) were used to indicate sections of the transcript that were inaudible or unclear but revealed the best possible transcription. The recurring themes document was continuously updated throughout the data immersion phase, and themes were adjusted or consolidated. In line with Tracy’s grounded theory recommendation, I discussed the themes with another researcher to aid “in sensemaking and in considering a variety of interpretations” (2013, p. 341). A final reading of the data occurred after this paper’s first draft was written to ensure accuracy and to assess whether additional examples of data should be included.

## Results

### Toxic Work Environment Themes

RQ1 asks: What types of communication do interviewees describe as contributing to a toxic work environment? After reading the data multiple times, I identified three types of communication that contributed to toxic work environments: *disrespectful*, *inconsistent*, and *insufficient* communication. These three styles serve as overarching themes and are described in more detail below.

When asked to describe toxic work environments, the majority of interviewees talked about individual people who communicated in a toxic way. Moving forward, such employees will often be referred to as toxic communicators or toxic colleagues. Sometimes the toxicity emerged from a group of individuals (often described as a “clique” or a “posse”), but most times it was one person whose behavior was affecting the well-being of an interviewee and their perception of their organizational climate. For example, multiple interviewees discussed developing stomach ulcers or other physical illnesses attributed to regular interactions with toxic communicators. Most of the toxic colleagues discussed were supervisors, although some were lateral colleagues. Analysis of the data revealed that toxic communicators were often difficult to spot when participants first joined an organization because the interviewees were viewing the mission-driven nonprofits through “rose-colored glasses,” or because the toxic colleague “talked a big game” or tended to be “an ass kisser.” In line with previous toxic work environment definitions, participants mentioned certain communication styles being “pervasive” or “constant” to create toxic environments (i.e., these environments typically were not created by a single negative communicative event). Although most of the information in this section will focus on the communication of individuals, some structural or policy issues will also be covered.

### ***Theme #1: Disrespectful Communication***

Participants said that disrespectful communication was a huge contributor to their toxic workplace environments. Words such as “petty,” “snipey,” or “passive aggressive” were often used to describe disrespectful discourse. Many participants felt that organizational leaders treated them less as humans and more as instruments to accomplish a nonprofit’s work. To illustrate this concept, they used words or phrases such as “management only sees them as a tool,” “feel like you’re a number,” and “a hired piece of the organization.” Additionally, interviewees used phrases such as “allowed to still be a human,” “like a human being should be treated,” and “basic human considerations” when discussing the dehumanizing nature of some toxic workplaces. Interviewees often identified disrespectful communication as communication that detracted from their autonomy, causing them to feel more as a means to an end than a human, an adult, or a professional. Three subthemes illustrated this point: *controlling communication*, *critical communication*, and *inconsiderate communication*.

**Controlling Communication.** Many participants felt disrespected when colleagues exhibited controlling behavior. Noah talked about a time when he had asked a subordinate about their opinion on an issue and then brought the issue to his co-leader: “She’s like, you never ask anyone’s opinion before you ask me. It’s always me first. Always.” Such controlling communication caused participants to feel a loss of agency and to feel like they were constantly “walking on eggshells.” Elizabeth’s nonprofit worked with children, and she had a similar negative experience when she asked her boss if she would be willing to be more present at the organization’s after-school events: “[My supervisor] was really clear that she felt like I was undermining her and that it was incredibly inappropriate for me to ever give her suggestions or even voice my frustrations.” These restrictive examples often had silencing effects on

interviewees, meaning that employee concerns often went unsaid and therefore went unresolved.

Participants also felt disrespected when supervisors exhibited micromanagement tendencies. Interviewees such as Abigail did not feel treated like an adult when supervisors' comments were consistently geared toward controlling their employees:

Our director would come in my office and say, 'What are you going to do today?' and 'Well, that should take about an hour. What would you do in the next hour?' Like, really?! This is what we're going to do? I'm like, why don't you just tell me what you need to have done and then trust me that I'll get it done?

Liam also described his experience with a micromanaging colleague:

[A] task would be assigned, but they would still want to be involved in every conversation regarding that task. Many times cutting off me or other individuals who had been assigned a task. ... Really not allowing or empowering folks to actually do their jobs, but rather trying to do them with them, or sometimes in spite of them.

**Critical Communication.** Employees felt disrespected when colleagues expressed criticism in non-productive ways. As with many types of toxic communication, critical comments tended to be perpetual. Isabella described the consistently critical emails that she received from a colleague: "They would be like a full printed page long of just her viscerals towards you and what you did wrong." Isabella said that after this toxic colleague started sending out "her emails," the organization experienced a period of high turnover. In the previously mentioned incident where Elizabeth asked her boss if she could be more present at nonprofit programming, her boss became critical of Elizabeth:

She said things like, ‘Oh, so on top of everything I’m expected to do, you’re telling me to do your [emphasis] job, too? Is it cause you can’t do your job? And what are we paying you for if it’s not to spend time with the kids?’

Even after Elizabeth explained the importance of having leadership at these programs, the communication she received in return remained critical and controlling.

Finally, in line with co-rumination research, participants such as Evelyn mentioned a difference between occasionally venting to a colleague and regularly being critical about organizational elements:

I did turn to people in the organization [about my concerns], just mainly one or two. It’s hard because I didn’t want to be a part of the toxic environment too by talking smack or letting on that there was a problem because I do think that that breeds that toxicity.

Similarly, Ava and Harper mentioned the term *backbiting* when referring to critical discussion of a colleague done behind that person’s back. Even when not listed by name, backbiting was regularly referenced as a contributor to toxic work environments.

**Inconsiderate Communication.** Several participants felt disrespected when their ideas, needs, or concerns were not taken into consideration, particularly by organizational leaders. When explaining his definition of a toxic work environment, Benjamin highlighted environments where “requests and demands [are] put down.” Noah talked about how his toxic colleague attacked all his ideas, which had the negative effect of causing him to pull back from his team and become less involved.

Often, employees were asked to produce results without being consulted about timelines. William said a phrase he heard often was “I really need this [task completed] by Friday.” He further explained:

If I pushed back, it would just be a repetition of that same response. Like, 'I don't need questions. I really just need you to do this by Friday.' And that very firm urging, that gives a level of urgency, but also a lack of agency on my part is really disheartening.

Similarly, Olivia spoke about the inconsiderate communication she received when a change was made that caused her to commute an extra eight hours per week: "It wasn't presented to me in a professional manner. It was just said, 'Hey, you're going to do this.' ... The communication itself was kind of toxic." These types of situations further contributed to participants' feelings of being treated solely as labor, not as people who possessed thoughts or concerns about workplace directives.

Inconsiderate communication could have toxic effects even when employees liked the directives. For example, Evelyn praised the many good ideas of a new director, but she pointed out how many of those ideas were implemented without consulting staff, causing tensions within the office. Sometimes controlling leaders would even be inconsiderate of the needs of critical stakeholders such as funders, as Liam experienced:

She insisted that we still needed to do that because that's what we said we were going to do and that we need to do what we said we were gonna do. And I explained that the funder no longer expected us to do that and was actually more excited about this alternative plan, and she just didn't really care like that was irrelevant.

### ***Theme #2: Inconsistent Communication***

Participants regularly mentioned feeling unsafe within toxic workplaces. Interviewees felt especially unsafe when inconsistent communication made it difficult to predict what colleagues or supervisors would say or do. Interviewees linked this type of communication with increased distrust within their workplaces. Additionally, participants in such environments experienced a

lack of motivation because they did not want to take action based on one exchange, only to have a separate communication indicate a different course of action. Beyond being unsure of what colleagues would say or do, structural inconsistencies such as changing job responsibilities also caused confusion. *Conflicting communication*, *hypocritical communication*, and *ambiguous role/task communication* were three subthemes within this category.

**Conflicting Communication.** Interviewees often felt like they were *going crazy* or *being gaslighted* (i.e., being made to question their own sanity) because colleague behavior conflicted with what had been previously communicated. Amelia discussed her struggles with getting promoted, and how her boss would often “dangle a carrot” of a promotion, and then later imply that Amelia was not as close to that promotion as she had thought:

Sort of caused me to question previous conversations, which [my supervisor and I] had about my performance, where she seemed very supportive and seemed to praise what I was doing. But when it came time to follow up that praise with any kind of concrete action, it seemed (that) there wasn't any support for that.

Abigail also described how she had a supervisor who would tell her one thing in private and then would behave differently in meetings with other people:

[My supervisor] would say things like, ‘It's going to be really difficult, but I got your back, it's going to be good.’ I'm like, ‘okay!’ And we get there, no, not anything like that. We get into meetings and she's throwing me under the bus (and I'm like, wait) this is not what we talked about!

The recurring inconsistency of words and actions caused employees to have diminished relationships with their supervisors and to develop increased workplace skepticism.

**Hypocritical Communication.** Similarly, interviewees were often frustrated when organizational members said actions should be taken for the good of the organization, but then those staff members would not act in accordance with those expectations. A recurring hypocritical behavior was supervisors closely monitoring employee punctuality but failing to be present themselves. Sofia described an organizational leader who would often call out team members for being five minutes late but would then arrive at work two hours late. Abigail spoke about a similar situation: “[My supervisor’s] calling me every morning, ‘What time are you going to come in today?’ But she was rarely in the office. And then she’d call in the afternoon, ‘What time are you leaving?’”

Another type of hypocrisy occurred when employees behaved or communicated in ways that were inconsistent with the organization's mission. Abigail worked for a Christian organization and wore a cross around her neck every day. However, she had a colleague who would use negative humor about Abigail’s open display of faith. If the organization was encountering some kind of obstacle, the toxic communicator would say something like, “Oh, we’ll just have Abigail pray about it.” When Abigail approached her colleague to explain that she didn’t appreciate the sarcastic comments, she would be met with more aggressive humor such as, “Oh, let’s just pray for forgiveness.” Abigail left that job quickly due to the toxic environment. Mia also felt she was observing hypocritical communication when she saw organizational leaders having an extensive conversation about what type of car one of the management team members should have. Mia did not appreciate that this and other workplace conversations were so focused on money and image instead of the organization’s mission.

**Ambiguous Role/Task Communication.** Inconsistent communication regarding job responsibilities was often said to have a negative impact on participants’ work experiences.



James spoke about his toxic environment as such: “New organizational charts, people's responsibilities were shifting around every six months, which led to a lot of frustration.”

Interviewees such as Mia became upset when fundraising became a bigger and bigger part of their organizational role, which seemed inconsistent with how their job descriptions were communicated when first interviewing or first being hired. Harper also expressed concerns with her ambiguous responsibilities and the communicated mentality of “Oh, you have an extra hour, can you do this job?” Data indicated that this type of communication caused participants to feel overwhelmed or burned out because they felt pulled in so many directions.

Additionally, Charlotte explained how her supervisor “doesn't really give much thought or hold much water in titles or responsibilities,” and therefore tended to communicate tasks to whoever was in front of him. This inconsistency in who communication was directed to sometimes led to multiple employees working on the same project but taking it in different directions. Charlotte and other participants explained how such situations contributed to low motivation because employees did not see the point in completing tasks if they were just going to be changed or be completed by someone else.

### ***Theme #3: Insufficient Communication***

A lack of communication was also seen to contribute to toxic environments. As Olivia pointed out, “people are not mind readers,” and participants became frustrated when they did not have clear project action steps. Unlike the previous two themes where toxic communication was directed at the participants, interviewees actively participated in insufficient communication, sometimes due to structural issues and sometimes due to uncertainty or a need for self-preservation.

Interviewees regularly avoided speaking directly about toxic workplace issues because they feared making bad situations worse. Sophia described why she avoided speaking up about her organizational leaders' hypocritical behavior: "It felt like that conversation would be a dead end ... and I wasn't in the position at that time to not have that part-time work. ... So it was a grin-and-bear-it [situation] for quite awhile." Ava also struggled to be transparent about her issues with a controlling colleague: "If I had the words, sure, I would but ... I'm not real good at that interpersonal stuff, you know? I don't want to (set) her off worse." Elizabeth had similar concerns about being transparent within her toxic environment:

I was supposed to go to [my supervisor]. But what do you do if your problem was about that person? And I didn't feel good about going to her cause I live in a very small community, and I love my job, and I worried she wouldn't be able to take feedback well, so I spent weeks and weeks agonizing over what to do.

These examples illustrated how insufficient communication can run rampant within an organization, providing little opportunity for toxic environments to be improved since employees are often afraid to speak clearly about concerns.

Many interviewees went as far as to say that resolution-focused communication needed to originate with organizational authority figures. Noah explained how leaders needed to be more involved and perceptive, since core staff often had reasons to be ambiguous with their complaints:

I was never going to say [that my toxic colleague should be removed from her position] outright on a phone call, because I would feel so bad knowing that I got her fired. I would feel so much responsibility and bad for it. I wanted to give [organizational leadership] all

the information, and I was trusting [them] to make the call that something needed to change. But the organization just wildly left me hanging.

Elizabeth similarly felt uncomfortable speaking to her board about her toxic executive director because she was bypassing the chain of command. She compromised by pointing the board in the right direction without giving too many details, saying phrases such as “it might be good to check in” or “things feel a little tense right now.”

However, when leaders did take action, sometimes they did so in an ineffective way by failing to develop an action plan with the concerned employee. Charlotte experienced a situation where she had a colleague who had a pattern of ignoring instructions and performing job tasks incorrectly. Charlotte’s boss unexpectedly sat the two of them down to talk and ended up letting her colleague off with a laugh and no repercussions. Charlotte had wanted more accountability-oriented action to be taken, and she also felt blindsided since this meeting and its approach had not been discussed with her in advance. Noah described a similar situation where he had been working hard to get to a good place with a toxic colleague, and leadership unexpectedly brought the two of them together for conflict resolution:

And I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, you idiot. What are you doing?’ Like I finally reached a place with her where we’re not arguing every single day. I’ve worked really hard for this and you guys are trying to stir up all this old junk ... it was just so wildly inappropriate, they didn’t give me any warning beforehand.

By failing to speak to the concerned party beforehand and make sure there was no ambiguity about desired action steps, intervening leaders often exacerbated workplace problems.

To summarize the results section to this point, RQ1 was answered by examining how three types of communication contributed to toxic work environments: *disrespectful*,

*inconsistent*, and *insufficient* communication. In general, toxic environments seemed to result from a single colleague using one of these three types of communication. The data supported past research indicating that toxic environments could have a negative impact on employees (e.g., physical ailments or reduced workplace motivation). *Disrespectful communication* included behavior that was designed to control employees. Additionally, disrespect could be presented via criticism or a lack of consideration for employees' needs or situations. *Inconsistent communication* included conflicts between words and actions that caused employees to question their sanity; hypocritical behavior from colleagues; and inconsistent job responsibilities being communicated to staff. *Insufficient communication* included information about why employees may not reveal workplace concerns due to uncertainty or a need for self-preservation. This subtheme also addressed how leaders should recognize these barriers to be able to communicate proactively.

### **Supportive Work Environment Themes**

I will now transition to findings related to supportive work environments. RQ2 asks: What types of communication do interviewees describe as contributing to a supportive work environment? I identified two types of communication that contributed to supportive work environments: *appreciative communication* and *transparent communication*. Similar to toxic environments, these inverse environments seemed to be created via recurring communication behaviors and not a single communicative event.

#### ***Theme #1: Appreciative Communication***

Appreciation was highly valued by participants. Since many nonprofit employees expressed being underpaid or overworked, having colleagues acknowledge their efforts went a long way. This appreciation tended to be most valued when it came from supervisors or

organizational leaders; however, participants appreciated when lateral colleagues acknowledged their work, too. Subthemes for this category included *affirming communication* and *investing communication*.

**Affirming Communication.** Multiple interviewees said that they did not need a “trophy” for their work, but they did appreciate communicated confirmation that they were doing good work. For example, Benjamin’s supervisor habitually helped him feel “propped up” and “celebrated”:

My boss in that respect is amazing. Just like two days ago, he sent me a text message saying what a great job I did on a particular video that I produced for social media. And he said, ‘I’m just so grateful for you. Thank you.’ He’s constantly and consistently giving me words of encouragement, words of gratitude.

Evelyn experienced affirmation in a more structured way during monthly staff meetings, when organizational leaders read anonymous staff shoutouts that have been submitted by employees throughout the month. The leaders read as many shoutouts as had been submitted, meaning those built-in appreciation moments could sometimes last as long as 20 minutes per meeting.

Additionally, participants such as Ava spoke highly about organizational leaders who gave interviewees total credit for successes:

[My supervisor’s] in public all the time and [people are] always like, ‘Oh, we loved this publication that you did’ or ‘We love this thing that you did.’ And she’s the first one always to say, ‘Oh, thank you, so and so did that.’

Abigail respected that trait in her former boss, too: “He just never seemed to let anything go unnoticed, but it didn’t seem condescending or contrived. ... He was just incredibly genuine, and genuinely seemed appreciative of whatever was done.”

The *inconsistent communication* theme featured the issue of gaslighting within toxic work environments. In such situations, affected employees tended to feel relieved when colleagues affirmed their experiences. When Ava felt like she was going crazy because of a toxic colleague's constant criticism, she felt better when a colleague confirmed that they had received similar communication. Additionally, participants within toxic environments appreciated when supervisors affirmed their value. Evelyn's supervisor had this to say after concerns erupted following a staff member being let go: "I would be fighting for you if someone said you need to go, because none of you should be fired or let go." Mia also spoke about how she felt supported when supervisors told her, "Don't worry about all this nonsense, you're safe here." Since participants highly valued the feeling of security, these affirming comments contributed to supportive environments by helping employees feel safe.

**Investing Communication.** Participants also felt appreciated when leaders were invested in their work, although not to the point of micromanagement. The data illustrated that people felt more appreciated when leaders asked specific questions about tasks rather than more general questions such as "what are you working on today?" Charlotte appreciated leaders that were able to hold people accountable (e.g., by asking about specific project deadlines) because they possessed more nuanced knowledge about their employees' current tasks. Using more individualized questions helped employees to feel that their work was noticed and valued.

Returning to the finding of employees wanting to be treated as humans or professionals, participants felt appreciated when leaders communicated an interest in their lives beyond their work roles. Ava's supervisor showed investment by being the first to tell Ava about any professional development opportunities. Similarly, Amelia's supervisor indicated that she could see her getting bored in her workplace role and therefore wanted to invest in Amelia's additional

interests. Emily's organizational leadership regularly asked her about non-work duties: "How is your learning and development going? Have you used your volunteer hours? What [do] your next few months look like? When are you taking vacations?" Although investing communication may not be directly related to work tasks, the data indicated that this type of communication helped increase employees' organizational and relational commitment.

### ***Theme #2: Transparent Communication***

Since insufficient or ambiguous communication often led to toxic environments, it makes sense that participants would link greater transparency to supportive work environments. Interviewees reported less burnout when their work tasks were clear and when they did not spend so much emotional labor obtaining the information that they needed. Transparent communication was described as a reciprocal process: When leaders were more transparent with core staff, then core staff felt safe enough to be transparent with their own needs and concerns. A similar reciprocity existed among lateral employees since additional transparency caused participants to be less skeptical about their colleagues' motives. Consistent two-way communication helped create supportive environments by providing staff members with the information that they needed to feel safe, to make more informed decisions, and to feel more invested in their work. This theme deviated from the previous themes because instead of focusing on the communication itself, the data illustrated conditions that supported transparent communication. Some notable conditions identified were having multiple communication venues, having leaders who were open to feedback, and having organizations that explained their values and rationale.

One way for nonprofits to create more open communication is to build time and space for such communication (e.g., schedule team meetings, staff retreats, or one-on-one conversations with supervisors). The participants who spoke most extensively about supportive environments

talked at length about their many opportunities to communicate. Sophia described such an opportunity within her nonprofit:

Having a debrief session, talking about lessons learned after a project wraps, so that there was an opportunity to talk about what went wrong, but not in a shameful or negative way, but in a way to be hopeful and look to the future as to how we would facilitate things differently.

Meetings can serve various communicative roles. They can be good opportunities for colleagues to touch base on roles and projects so that people are not “spinning their wheels” and performing work that is already being done by someone else. Sophia’s organization alternated who led each of their staff meetings, and the meeting leader was in charge of asking the staff for updates, questions, or concerns about each of the nonprofit’s current programs. To ensure that employees were all aware of organizational happenings, Evelyn’s staff shared accomplishments by writing them on large flip chart paper during meetings.

Off-site retreats provided a less regular opportunity for organizational teams to interact with each other or to communicate about big picture changes. For example, Harper’s staff had used retreats as an opportunity to weigh-in on what programs might need to be cut. Even though those conversations were tough, staff members said they appreciated being provided the space to voice their opinions. Other organizations used retreats to communicate about new policies or to reinforce organizational values. James said such retreats could be a useful opportunity to bring remote staff together to get everyone on the same page. Additionally, interviewees said that having workplace social events such as barbecues, paint nights, or golf scrambles could provide opportunities for staff members to learn about each other’s roles in a less formal way, which assisted in the development of trust and empathy.



Communication opportunities did not always take the form of structured gatherings. Evelyn's organization had recently implemented an anonymous feedback box where staff could submit workplace issues. William also mentioned that having a formalized and anonymous complaint system could create a more supportive work environment by providing a transparent way for staff members to address concerns. Of course, in the 21st century, communication spaces do not always need to be physical. Charlotte discussed how her team digitally shared project updates: "We didn't have a fancy program. We used Google Docs and an excel spreadsheet. It just had project pieces and dates. There wasn't necessarily a need to have a lot of meetings because everything was kind of there." Emily's executive team also used digital discourse by emailing the staff a monthly update about executive team member projects.

Beyond providing executive updates, organizational leaders who communicated availability helped staff to feel safe enough to provide feedback about workplace needs and concerns. "[My supervisor] never makes it feel like you've interrupted," said Ava. "Like she can be in the middle of something, you walk in her office, and she's all there. She's present with you and ready to discuss whatever it is." Management's clear, consistent, and genuine open-door policies were regularly referenced within supportive workplace descriptions.

Quality leaders even took their communication a step further and asked questions that solicited employee feedback. Elizabeth said that she appreciated her board asking her questions such as "What do you need?" or "How can we support you in that?" Additionally, Evelyn talked about how her boss asked for constructive criticism during Evelyn's recent performance evaluation:

She was like, ‘Well, tell me what I’m doing wrong. This isn’t your review, I want to know how I can help you.’ And though I said, couldn’t think of anything, she said, ‘No, seriously, come back [any time with feedback], whatever I can do.’

The insufficient communication theme illustrated how core staff members often faced fears about being too transparent. However, leaders were able to reduce or remove those fears by communicating openness to feedback.

Another concern mentioned in the insufficient communication theme was that interviewees were disappointed when colleagues’ behavior did not mirror the communicated mission or vision of the organization. Liam proposed that consistently reinforcing a nonprofit’s core values could help prevent that discrepancy:

We make [our core values] a part of our regular conversation and communication. Our performance review includes on the front splash page, our core values are listed right there. Whenever I do my employee evaluations, I always reference ways in which they exemplify our core value. I think [how you get core value buy-in] is just talking about them ... a lot.

Additionally, some interviewees discussed their staff’s intentional efforts to clarify the rationale of various processes and policies. Evelyn’s nonprofit created a staff committee whose goal was to explain the purpose of every organizational process, and to make those processes equitable across the organization. Clear rationale contributed to supportive environments because employees felt more motivated and respected if they fully understood why they needed to take certain actions. For example, William explained how being provided context instead of “being told to jump and not question it” helped him feel like he was selected for a task for a reason, causing him to be more committed to the work and more receptive to imposed deadlines. Also,

tying rationale to an organization's mission, vision, or values often proved inspiring since so many nonprofit workers were committed to their organization's purpose.

In summary, RQ2 was answered by examining how *appreciative* and *transparent* communication contributed to supportive work environments. Appreciative communication included comments and behavior that affirmed employees or illustrated an investment in them. Transparent communication focused on conditions that could promote open communication and included examples of questions that tended to promote a supportive environment.

### **Discussion**

Since many modern employees refer to *toxic* work environments, this study was designed to explore prominent communication behaviors that contribute to such environments. As the study evolved, it became clear that people often contrasted their toxic workplaces with opposing environments, defined here as supportive work environments. Both toxic and supportive workplaces are broad concepts and are therefore difficult to define. However, these data support existing research on workplace communication behaviors and inspire future research on the narrower communication concepts that may contribute to these environments. Additionally, anecdotes were provided on both sides of the toxic-supportive continuum to help organizational leaders be more aware of toxic communication and how to adjust communication patterns to create a more supportive environment. This section of the paper provides suggestions for both researchers and practitioners.

RQ1 focused on the communication that contributes to toxic workplaces. This study supports several of the toxic workplace definitions within business and sociology literature, including the attribute that toxic environments are created through recurring behaviors and not singular incidents. Much of the existing literature indicated that negative work environments

could be caused from the communication of one person within the workplace, and this dataset supports that finding. Additionally, several participants explained how toxic communicators “talked a big game” or were overly nice when they first started a job, making it so that their toxic qualities were not noticed until later. This finding was in line with previously mentioned research, such as the Mikkelsen et al. (2017) study about narcissistic leaders being charismatic, so their poor communication traits were not discovered until later in their organizational tenure. The word *unsafe* was often seen in the RQ1 sections of the data, indicating that toxic communication seemed to threaten the second level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, people’s desire for safety (Hale et al., 2019).

Three overarching themes, *disrespectful communication*, *inconsistent communication*, and *insufficient communication*, were the primary themes that addressed RQ1. The disrespectful communication category further confirmed the immense impact that a single employee can have on a work climate, especially if that employee is in a position of power. Participants explained how disrespectful communication caused them to feel like mere workers instead of humans, adults, or professionals. The recurring mention of the word *human* was especially provocative, because I did not expect that so many participants would imply that their basic human needs were not being met within the workplace. Three subthemes were identified within the disrespectful communication category. First, *controlling communication* featured examples of colleagues having their actions restricted due to the communication of others. This type of communication included micromanagement from supervisors. Controlling colleagues seemed to possess well-ingrained communication styles; however, one participant did indicate how he had seen a controlling colleague positively change her communication style by listening to staff feedback and deciding to regularly consider alternate approaches. This contrary perspective

seemed to promote a healthier work environment by creating more space for employee autonomy. Second, *critical communication* featured examples of employees presenting criticism in perpetual and unproductive ways. This type of communication included backbiting, where employees spoke critically about other employees behind their backs. Participants often mentioned high turnover within environments that had high levels of critical communication. Since hiring and training new employees can be time-consuming and expensive, organizational leaders should attempt to identify and speak out against critical communication to help diminish employee turnover. Third, *inconsiderate communication* featured examples of employees having their ideas and concerns disregarded or attacked. Once again, this communication stripped employees of their autonomy or their self-image as a competent professional.

The second overarching theme, inconsistent communication, illustrated additional behaviors that caused participants to feel unmotivated or unsafe within their workplaces. Three subthemes were identified within this category. First, *conflicting communication* featured examples of employees being told one thing only to have their colleagues act in a different or contradictory way. Such situations led participants to question their sanity, often using the terms *gaslighting* or *crazy*. Second, *hypocritical communication* featured examples of employees saying that certain actions needed to be taken but then failing to abide by those communicated standards. Hypocrisy appeared to be especially troublesome for this participant sample since many interviewees had been drawn to the mission of their nonprofits. Several hypocritical directives seemed to address the issue of being present in the office, so nonprofit leaders should either communicate more flexibility regarding in-office work hours or should make sure that they are modeling the amount of in-office time that they expect of their employees. Additionally, nonprofit employees should try to limit communication that indicates selfishness, since that type

of communication often appeared hypocritical when compared to the altruistic missions of the organizations. Third, *ambiguous role/task communication* featured examples of employees being frustrated by shifting responsibilities. This issue seemed especially prevalent within this sample because nonprofits can regularly be understaffed. Obviously, organizations must exist within their resource restrictions, but these data indicated that nonprofits sometimes remained understaffed for unnecessary reasons. For example, a Chief Operating Officer position was left unfilled at Charlotte's organization because the founder had viewed the previous COO's departure as a personal attack. In an unexpected finding, participants often expressed a desire for more hierarchy within their organizations. They explained that having intermediaries between core staff and the topmost executive members created fewer communication breakdowns and allowed toxic behavior to be addressed more often since there was more direct oversight. With this information, nonprofit leaders may want to assess their hierarchy to ensure that it is clearly defined. Additionally, organizational positions should not remain vacant longer than needed; otherwise, remaining employees may feel spread thin or feel that they do not have an outlet to voice concerns (e.g., a supervisor or a human resources staff member).

The insufficient communication theme illustrated how a lack of communication can be just as powerful as negative verbal or nonverbal cues. After all, toxic environments are bound to exist if problems and misunderstandings are not addressed via clear, transparent communication. This category featured examples of why insufficient communication could become widespread within an organization, including staff not communicating concerns because of a fear of backlash. For most of these participants, "the motive to bring about improvement exist[ed], but it [was] overpowered by other motives" (Morrison, 2011, p. 382). Organizational leaders should avoid becoming secondary provokers and should regularly communicate with core staff about

toxic workplace elements. After all, “to respond appropriately to dynamic business conditions, make good decisions, and correct problems before they escalate, top managers need information from employees at lower levels in the organization – information that may not otherwise come to their awareness” (Morrison, 2011, p. 374). Once they have worked with core staff to identify communication pain points, management can respond with an appropriate accountability-oriented intervention. Additionally, when employees do make leaders aware of workplace issues with third parties, management should have a two-way conversation with the affected employee(s) before taking action. Incorporating that additional communication can lessen the chance of ineffective action or escalating problems.

Two overarching themes answered RQ2 – *appreciative communication* and *transparent communication*. Appreciative communication became especially important since nonprofit employees were often not being compensated in other ways (e.g., a high salary). Two subthemes were identified within this category. First, *affirming communication* featured examples of employees helping other employees feel that they were doing good work and that their jobs were safe. The data indicated that this type of communication was most effective when it appeared genuine and did not appear condescending. Communicating affirmation to colleagues directly was important, and employees also appreciated when their supervisors gave them credit for their work when speaking with others. Additionally, when employees felt gaslighted, they appreciated having their experiences affirmed. Similarly, when participants felt stressed because of their toxic environments, they valued supervisors who helped them feel safe by telling them that they had nothing to worry about or that their jobs/roles were secure. Second, *investing communication* featured examples of leaders taking an active interest in employees, while not crossing into micromanagement territory. Participants appreciated when leaders asked them more specific

questions about their work because it helped them feel valued when their supervisors had a deeper knowledge of their projects. This theme also illustrated employees' desire to be seen as humans and professionals. Therefore, participants often appreciated when supervisors asked them non-task questions such "when are you taking vacations" or "how is your learning and development going?"

The transparent communication theme featured conditions that promoted open, two-way communication that contributed to supportive environments. A foundational element was to simply create time and space for communication, whether that be through physical means (e.g., meetings or employee feedback boxes) or digital spaces (e.g., a monthly executive team email). Additionally, many participants specifically spoke about off-site retreats contributing to supportive environments, which supports past research indicating that off-site training can be "widely appreciated" by staff because the off-site setting makes it easier "to step outside the day-to-day routine and reflect" (Brinkert, 2011, p. 87). Again, core staff often avoided being too transparent about workplace issues because they feared consequences, so leaders also have a role to play in encouraging transparency. Having a genuine open-door policy and showing up at organizational events can go a long way toward communicating a leader's accessibility. Quality leaders also regularly asked their followers what they needed and welcomed personal critiques. Finally, making organizational values and rationale clear can create higher levels of organizational, relational, and role commitment among employees.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study focused solely on nonprofit employees to provide a shared frame of reference in which themes could emerge. These data confirmed previous literature about nonprofits (e.g., Stater & Stater, 2018) that indicated that nonprofits tend to possess organizational elements that



could foster toxic environments (e.g., being short staffed or underfunded). Future studies should focus on different types of employees (e.g., for-profit staff members) to see if similar themes emerge or if different industries have distinct communication styles that contribute to toxic or supportive environments.

Also, a decision was made that most participant demographics were unneeded for this exploratory study. Although I was still able to use the data to assess that the participant sample was diverse in several categories, future studies may want to collect additional demographic information to see if certain types of toxic or supportive communication are more salient to different demographic groups. Specifically, many participants mentioned that they were underresourced because they worked for a small nonprofit. Therefore, scholars may want to operationalize organizational size to see if size influences the communication needed to create positive or negative work climates.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This research contributes to scholarship regarding defensive and supportive communication climates. Although a toxic work environment may not align perfectly with a defensive communication climate, these data indicate many shared elements (e.g., exhibiting controlling behaviors, lacking concern for employees, and being so certain that it causes inflexibility). The supportive environments described throughout this manuscript also have links to Gibb's supportive climates (e.g., involving employees in problem solving, appearing genuine and empathetic, and exhibiting enough provisionalism to be flexible). Appendix B illustrates Gibb's 12 behavioral categories that create defensive and supportive climates (1961), and all 12 behaviors were exhibited in the current study's dataset. Costigan and Schmeidler (1984) did operationalize communication climate via an instrument, so future research could attempt to

adapt that instrument to assess whether work environments are toxic or supportive. Additionally, the current study provides support for scholarly work regarding confirming communication (i.e., “behaviors that have a positive or ‘therapeutic’ effect upon the receiver”) and disconfirming communication (i.e., “behaviors that have been reported to arouse in the receiver negative self-feelings about his identity, self worth [sic], and relatedness to others” [Sieburg, 1976, p. 130]).

Some of these data could contribute to additional communication theories, although to a lesser extent. For example, study participants were asked if there was a specific moment when they realized that they were in a toxic or supportive environment to see if turning points had relevance within this dataset. Turning points are defined as “any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship” (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 470). The turning points theory was not overly relevant within the current study because many interviewees indicated that their understandings of their work climates occurred gradually. However, some participants did identify turning points, and a similar study could perhaps make better use of such analysis. Additionally, LMX was a possible lens with which to analyze these data since participants often focused on their relationships with their supervisors. However, interviewees did not often indicate whether they felt like they were part of their supervisor's in group or not. Similar to turning points, a few LMX details did exist within these data, so LMX may be a useful theory within related research.

### **Practitioner Implications**

People who work for nonprofits and read this study may engage in self-reflection about the ways in which they communicate at work and how that communication affects their environment. If employees turn to this study because they are experiencing a toxic environment, perhaps they will receive some catharsis knowing that other people are going through similar

difficult situations. Many themes within this paper focus on organizational leadership's central role in setting the tone for supportive environments, as well as actively speaking out against toxic behavior. Amelia and other study participants spoke about the need for organizational management to better understand their work environments and to use the power of their position to seek feedback and implement change. Nonprofit leaders can take a page from participant Emily's organization by distributing anonymous employee engagement surveys or learning about employees' work climate perceptions via other methods (e.g., focus groups or one-on-one conversations). If employees are discovered to be exhibiting any of the three toxic communication themes identified in this study, organizational management should engage them in accountability-oriented communication. If the desired changes are not achieved, management can then consider whether a toxic colleague is a good fit for the organization. As Emily put it when discussing the positive changes at her nonprofit: "It's more important to have a healthy culture overall than to have one person creating waves or causing tension."

Throughout this study, I often indicated the recurring words that were used to describe toxic or supportive environments. Organizational leadership can get a sense of their workplace climate by looking for such words and phrases within employee feedback. For example, participants often used words such as *unsafe*, *backbiting*, or *petty* when describing communication in toxic environments. Conversely, they tended to use words such as *safe*, *genuine*, and *open* when speaking about supportive environments. Once toxic elements or barriers are identified via employee feedback, organizational leaders can take appropriate action steps (e.g., establishing committees) to address pain points. And in the spirit of appreciative and transparent communication, any action steps taken because of employee feedback should be clearly communicated so that staff members feel heard and valued.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Demographic questions:

- How long have you worked full-time for your current nonprofit employer?
- And how many total years have you worked full-time for nonprofits?

### Core questions:

1. When you hear the term toxic work environment, what does that mean to you?
2. Have you experienced such an environment? Without telling me what workplace it was, can you tell me more about this/these environment(s)
3. Can you recall the first time you realized you were in a toxic environment? Can you reflect on those events and tell me about them?
4. [If the interviewee does not identify a specific turning point]: Can you describe the communication that contributed to this/these toxic environment(s)?
5. Were you able to talk with anyone within your organization about any negative feelings you had toward this organization/person/etc? What types of people were you able to talk with? How did you explain the situation to them?
6. Were you able to talk with anyone outside your organization about any negative feelings you had toward this organization/person/etc? What types of people were you able to talk with? How did you explain the situation to them?
7. Were there other types of people you would have liked to have spoken with about these environments? If so, why did you not speak to those people?
8. Did the people you confided in give you any helpful advice about your situation? Any advice that was not helpful? If so, what was that advice? What did those conversations look like?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your toxic work environment(s)?
10. What does the opposite of a toxic work environment look like to you?
11. Have you experienced such an environment? Can you tell me more about it?
12. Can you recall the first time you realized you were in a supportive environment? [May replace supportive environment with words that participant uses to describe the opposite of a toxic workplace.] Can you reflect on those events and tell me about them?
13. [If the interviewee does not identify a specific turning point]: Can you describe the communication that contributed to this/these supportive environment(s)?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your supportive work environment(s)?
15. In closing, do you have any final thoughts on what type of communication minimizes toxic work environments? Helps someone overcome these environments? After discussing the opposite of a toxic environment, any final thoughts on what types of communication contribute to toxic environments?

## Appendix B

### Defensive and Supportive Communication (Gibb, 1961)

<b>Defensive Communication</b>	<b>Supportive Communication</b>
<i>Evaluation</i> - Indicating judgment toward a person	<i>Description</i> - Relaying or asking about information in a genuine way
<i>Control</i> - Swaying the message recipient in a certain way	<i>Problem Orientation</i> - Including the message recipient in the problem-solving process
<i>Strategy</i> - Deceiving someone or possessing an ulterior motive	<i>Spontaneity</i> - Appearing genuine and free of deception
<i>Neutrality</i> - Lacking concern for a person's well being	<i>Empathy</i> - Affirming a person's feelings or worth
<i>Superiority</i> - Implying that someone is inferior to the communicator	<i>Equality</i> - Implying that someone is the communicator's equal
<i>Certainty</i> - Portraying that the communicator is often or always right	<i>Provisionalism</i> - Willing to consider information on an individual basis