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BEYOND TOXIC LEADERS: A MULTILEVEL REVIEW OF DESTRUCTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Maqsood Haider[*1], Anwar Khan[2], Muhammad Anwar[3]

[*1]*Department of Management Sciences, FATA University, Pakistan*
[2]*Department of Management Sciences, Khushal Khan Khattak University, Pakistan*
[3]*Department of Communication and Media Studies, Khushal Khan Khattak University, Karak, Pakistan*

[*1]dr.haider@fu.edu.pk, [2]akpashtoon1981@gmail.com, [3]muhammad.anwar@kkkuk.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *
Maqsood Haider
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ABSTRACT

Research on destructive or "toxic" leadership (e.g., abusive, authoritarian, exploitative) has expanded substantially over the past two decades, with meta-analytic evidence documenting consistent links to employee strain, deviance, and performance impairment. However, leader-centric explanations risk individualizing what is frequently a systemic phenomenon: organizational climates that normalize mistreatment, reward coercion, suppress voice, and render accountability inconsistent. This conceptual review reframes destructive leadership as embedded within and often sustained by destructive organizational climates defined as shared perceptions that hostility, bullying, injustice, or intimidation are tolerated, instrumentally useful, or necessary for goal attainment. Drawing on multilevel climate theory, destructive leadership scholarship, psychosocial safety climate research, and recent integrative syntheses, we advance a three-level framework with cross-level feedback loops. At the organizational level, performance regimes, HR accountability architecture, work design stressors, and executive priorities shape climate conditions under which destructiveness becomes functional or constrained. At the unit level, proximal climates such as abusive supervision climate, hostile work climate, and bullying-permissive norms operationalize these macro signals. At the individual level, mechanisms including social information processing, collective sensemaking, identity erosion, threat adaptation, and silence translate shared perceptions into strain, disengagement, aggression, and health impairment. We synthesize evidence demonstrating that climate-level abuse predicts outcomes beyond individual exposure and that hostile climates mediate stressor-to-bullying pathways over extended time lags. We further explain why conventional "fix the leader" interventions frequently fail when systemic incentives remain misaligned. Finally, we outline climate-focused intervention levers accountability redesign, metric reform, psychosocial safety prioritization, work design correction, and unit-level norm rebuilding and propose a research agenda emphasizing longitudinal, cross-level, and context-sensitive designs.

Keywords: *Destructive Leadership, Abusive Supervision, Workplace Bullying, Hostile Work Climate, Abusive Supervision Climate, Organizational Climate, Multilevel Theory*

1.INTRODUCTION

Why "Toxic Leaders" Is an Incomplete Story

The "dark side" of leadership has moved from a niche concern to a core issue in organizational research and practice. Robust meta-analytic literature consistently shows that destructive leadership behaviors such as abusive supervision, exploitative leadership, and insensitivity to follower welfare are strongly associated with adverse employee outcomes. These include increased burnout, psychological strain, decreased job satisfaction, elevated turnover intentions, and greater workplace deviance (Mackey et al., 2017;

Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper et al., 2017). In many instances, the magnitude of these negative effects equals or exceeds the positive effects associated with effective leadership behaviors (Zhu et al., 2022; Ling et al., 2024).

Despite this evidence, organizational solutions remain overwhelmingly focused on leaders as isolated causal agents. Standard responses include performance coaching, leadership development, removing an incumbent manager, or conducting organizational "values workshops." These interventions assume that the leader alone is responsible for harmful workplace outcomes and that replacing or rehabilitating the individual leader will resolve systemic dysfunction (Baur & Riggio, 2022).

However, this leader-centric view overlooks broader contextual forces. Leaders do not act in a vacuum; they are embedded within organizational climates, collective perceptions of practices, norms, and behavioral expectations that shape what is considered acceptable or rewarded (Schneider et al., 2017). Organizational climate operates as a socializing force: when disrespect, intimidation, or moral indifference are implicitly tolerated, destructive conduct becomes normalized rather than aberrant (Nahrgang et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2023). In such environments, replacing one "toxic" leader may simply introduce another who fits the same dysfunctional climate.

This systemic perspective is supported by multilevel research demonstrating the importance of climate phenomena such as abusive supervision climate a shared perception among employees that supervisory mistreatment is normative within a group or unit. Abusive supervision climate has been shown to be predictive of negative outcomes above and beyond individual perceptions of supervisor behavior, including collective psychological distress, team conflict, and group-level withdrawal behaviors (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2021; Zhao & Liao, 2023). Moreover, hostile work environment climates—characterized by pervasive hostility, humiliation, and harassment norms—can mediate the relationship between leadership behaviors and workplace outcomes, amplifying the detrimental influence of individual leaders (Harvey et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Beyond abusive supervision, recent work has highlighted other climate constructs that shape destructive leadership dynamics. For example, performance-at-all-costs climates and ethical disengagement climates have been linked to increased incivility, risk-taking, and moral disengagement among leaders and followers alike (Henle et al., 2023; Wang & Liu, 2025). These findings suggest that the broader organizational ecosystem, not simply the personality or behaviors of an individual leader, is a key driver of dysfunctional patterns.

Climate-based framing also aligns with theoretical advances in multilevel organizational science. According to social information processing theory, shared contextual cues influence how employees interpret, respond to, and replicate social behaviors (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). When climate signals that aggression is instrumental or that ethical boundaries are flexible such signals shape collective sensemaking and reinforce destructive conduct (Schneider et al., 2017; Ostroff et al., 2022). Importantly, organizational climate is not immutable. Evidence indicates that climates can be reshaped through structural interventions targeting norms, reward systems, accountability mechanisms, and formal policies (Schneider et al., 2017; Zhu & Liu, 2024). A shift from leader-centric to system-level interventions reframes destructive leadership from an individual pathology to a symptom of systemic dysfunction and highlights opportunities for structural reform rather than episodic fixes.

In sum, while the individual leader remains an important unit of analysis, it is insufficient to focus solely on "toxic leaders" without considering the organizational climate that sustains them. This review advances a climate-centered conceptualization of destructive leadership, integrating foundational theory with recent multilevel findings. We argue that destructive leadership is often both a product and perpetuator of a destructive climate, and therefore, systemic diagnosis and intervention are essential for meaningful change.

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Destructive Leadership: What it is and What it isn't?

Destructive leadership is most commonly defined as systematic and repeated leader behavior that violates the legitimate interests of the organization by undermining organizational goals and/or harming the well-being, motivation, or job satisfaction of subordinates (Einarsen et al., 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Importantly, destructiveness is not limited to overt aggression. It

encompasses a broad constellation of behaviors, including abusive supervision, toxic leadership, authoritarian or despotic leadership, petty tyranny, exploitative leadership, leader undermining, and even extreme forms of laissez-faire leadership where inaction enables harm (Krasikova et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2021).

This definitional breadth clarifies two conceptual boundaries. First, destructive leadership is behavioral, not purely dispositional. While dark personality traits (e.g., narcissism, psychopathy) may predispose certain leaders toward harmful conduct, the construct itself centers on enacted behavior and its consequences rather than internal pathology (Spain et al., 2014). Second, destructive leadership is systematic and repeated, isolated incidents of incivility or misjudgment do not suffice. The patterning and persistence of harm distinguishes destructive leadership from episodic conflict or poor interpersonal skill.

Synthesis research yields two robust conclusions.

First, destructive leadership is not rare. Cross-national evidence indicates that a meaningful proportion of employees report exposure to sustained supervisory hostility or undermining behaviors (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper et al., 2017). Recent large-scale surveys continue to document persistent exposure rates across sectors, suggesting that destructive leadership remains a structural rather than episodic organizational problem (Mackey et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2024).

Second, its consequences are reliably negative and often substantial. Meta-analyses link destructive leadership to elevated emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, counterproductive work behavior, reduced organizational commitment, diminished performance, and increased turnover intentions (Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2023). Moreover, longitudinal evidence suggests that destructive leadership predicts deteriorations in mental health over time, even after controlling for baseline strain (Park et al., 2022). Notably, some research indicates that destructive leadership may exert stronger negative effects than the absence of positive leadership exerts beneficial effects, highlighting asymmetry in influence (Zhu et al., 2022).

2.2 Organizational Climate: Why the "Shared Perception" Lens Matters

Organizational climate refers to employees' shared perceptions of policies, practices, procedures, and behavioral norms, essentially, "how things are done around here" (Schneider et al., 2017). Climate is typically examined at the unit or organizational level and often conceptualized in facet-specific forms, such as justice climate, safety climate, service climate, and ethical climate (Ostroff et al., 2022). The significance of climate lies in its normative function. Under conditions of ambiguity common in complex organizational environments, employees rely on shared perceptions to interpret what behaviors are acceptable, rewarded, or risky (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Climate, therefore, acts as a meaning-making filter, shaping behavioral scripts and constraining or enabling action.

A destructive organizational climate extends beyond generalized dissatisfaction or negative morale. It reflects a patterned, socially reinforced perception that mistreatment is tolerated, complaints are unsafe, accountability is selective and protecting reputational or performance interests supersedes protecting people (Morrison et al., 2023; Nahrgang et al., 2022). In such climates, silence may be interpreted as loyalty, dissent as betrayal, and aggression as decisiveness.

Empirical evidence supports the behavioral potency of climate perceptions. Ethical climate research demonstrates that when employees perceive norms endorsing self-interest or instrumental rationality, unethical behaviors increase (Newman et al., 2020). Similarly, incivility and aggression research shows that climates normalizing disrespect amplify interpersonal harm through contagion effects (Foulk et al., 2021). These findings underscore that climate operates as a collective amplifier, it not only reflects shared meaning but also actively shapes the likelihood of harmful conduct.

2.3 From Leader Behavior to Climate: The Collective-Level Move

A critical conceptual bridge between destructive leadership and climate science is the construct of abusive supervision climate, the shared perception within a work unit that supervisory abuse characterizes the environment (Priesemuth et al., 2014). This construct represents a shift from an individual-level focus ("my supervisor abuses me") to a collective-level understanding ("abuse is typical here"). Research demonstrates that abusive supervision climate predicts unit-level outcomes above and beyond individual perceptions of abuse. For example, abusive supervision climate has been

linked to collective deviance, team withdrawal, reduced team performance, and heightened emotional exhaustion at the group level (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2015; Zhao & Liao, 2023). These effects operate through collective mechanisms, including diminished group identification, erosion of collective efficacy, and normalization of retaliatory behavior.

Moreover, recent multilevel models suggest that climate functions both as a mediator and a moderator. It can mediate the impact of leader behavior by shaping shared interpretations of mistreatment, and it can amplify harm by reinforcing behavioral norms that legitimize aggression (Harvey et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Thus, destructive leadership may seed a climate of hostility, but once established, that climate sustains and institutionalizes harmful dynamics even beyond the individual leader. This collective-level move reframes destructive leadership from a purely dyadic phenomenon to a systemic one. It shifts analysis from isolated leader-follower interactions to socially shared patterns of meaning and behavior. In doing so, it opens theoretical and practical space for interventions targeting norms, accountability structures, and shared perceptions rather than focusing exclusively on leader remediation.

3. Outcomes of Destructive Climates: Beyond "Employee Wellbeing"

If destructive leadership is the spark, destructive climate is the oxygen. Once harmful norms become ambient, the damage extends well beyond individual-level distress. A climate that normalizes mistreatment reshapes how people think, speak, cooperate, and perform. Its consequences are multi-domain, systemic, and often self-reinforcing.

3.1 Health and Psychological Strain

A consistent finding in multilevel research is that abusive supervision climate predicts health-related outcomes above and beyond individual exposure. In other words, even employees who are not personally targeted experience strain when they perceive that supervisory abuse is normative in their unit (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2015). Recent studies demonstrate that climate-level abuse relates to elevated emotional exhaustion, depressive symptoms, and reduced psychological well-being at the group level (Park et al., 2022; Zhao & Liao, 2023). This "ambient toxicity" effect is theoretically consistent with stress contagion and social information processing models: shared perceptions of threat heighten vigilance, reduce psychological safety, and deplete emotional resources (Foulk et al., 2021; Ostroff et al., 2022). Crucially, this means harm is not confined to direct victims. Destructive climates create anticipatory stress employees expend cognitive and emotional resources, managing risk, monitoring leader moods, and navigating uncertainty. Over time, this erodes resilience and increases burnout, even among peripheral observers. The cost is distributed, not isolated.

3.2 Silence, Reduced Voice, and Error Concealment

One of the most consequential downstream effects of destructive climates is employee silence. When employees perceive that retaliation is plausible, complaints are unwelcome, or dissent signals disloyalty, silence becomes a rational strategy (Morrison, 2023). Research shows that abusive supervision climate and hostile work environments are associated with reduced upward voice and increased defensive silence (Xu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Psychological safety defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking and is systematically undermined in climates characterized by intimidation or disrespect (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

The organizational implications are profound. Silence inhibits error reporting, safety disclosures, and ethical whistleblowing. Studies in safety-critical industries demonstrate that climates low in psychological safety and high in fear predict concealment of mistakes and delayed reporting (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Newman et al., 2020). Over time, this creates organizational fragility: problems accumulate silently until they surface as crises.

3.3 Workplace Aggression, Deviance, and Conflict Escalation

Destructive climates also shape behavioral norms regarding aggression and deviance. A broad meta-analysis linking leadership styles to workplace aggression found that destructive leadership is positively associated with aggressive employee behavior, whereas ethical leadership demonstrates protective associations (Bedi & Schat, 2023). From a social learning perspective, when leaders model hostility or when climate signals that hostility is

tolerated, employees infer that aggression is permissible or instrumentally useful (Bandura, 1977; Schneider et al., 2017). This facilitates retaliation, incivility contagion, and conflict escalation (Foulk et al., 2021). Climate-level abuse predicts collective deviance and retaliatory behaviors beyond individual mistreatment experiences (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Zhao & Liao, 2023). In such settings, aggression becomes normalized rather than exceptional. Conflict shifts from interpersonal disagreement to systemic antagonism.

3.4 Performance, Cooperation, and Collective Functioning

Beyond psychological harm and behavioral disruption, destructive climates undermine the core mechanisms that enable collective performance. Research shows that abusive supervision climate erodes group identification and collective efficacy, which are foundational to coordinated effort and cooperation (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Harvey et al., 2021). When employees perceive that leaders are unfair or hostile, trust deteriorates. Without trust, cooperation becomes transactional and minimal rather than discretionary and collaborative. Multilevel analyses indicate that climate-level abuse predicts lower team performance through weakened cohesion and impaired communication (Zhang & Liao, 2023; Li et al., 2024). In parallel, ethical and justice climates have been shown to enhance cooperation and collective engagement, reinforcing the regulatory role of shared norms in shaping performance outcomes (Newman et al., 2020).

4. Why Common Interventions Fail (and What to Do Instead)

Organizations often respond to destructive leadership with a predictable playbook: send the manager to training, provide executive coaching, conduct a "culture workshop," or quietly replace the leader. While these responses are not inherently misguided, they are frequently insufficient because they treat the leader as the primary causal agent and neglect the systemic conditions that enable harm. Climate-based framing suggests a more uncomfortable conclusion: destructive behavior persists not simply because leaders lack skill or awareness, but because the surrounding system tolerates, rewards, or protects it.

4.1 Why "Train the Manager" Is Often Insufficient

Leadership training programs typically assume that destructive conduct stems from deficits in interpersonal skill, emotional intelligence, or ethical awareness. Yet research on destructive leadership consistently shows that harmful behaviors are often strategic, reinforced, or structurally enabled rather than purely ignorant or accidental (Krasikova et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2021).

If climate-level incentives remain intact, punitive performance metrics, competitive ranking systems, weak accountability mechanisms, or implicit tolerance of intimidation training risks becoming symbolic compliance rather than structural change (Schneider et al., 2017). Leaders adapt to what is rewarded, not what is preached. Thus, interventions that focus narrowly on the individual leader risk treating symptoms rather than causes.

4.2 Climate-Focused Intervention Levers: Actionable Pathways

If destructive leadership is embedded within destructive climates, then interventions must operate at the climate level. Below are empirically grounded levers that organizations can deploy.

4.2.1 Accountability Redesign

Climate signals are transmitted through how misconduct is handled. When investigations lack independence or consequences are opaque, the organization communicates tolerance.

Effective accountability redesign includes:

Independent reporting and investigation pathways.

Transparent consequence structures.

Explicit anti-retaliation enforcement mechanisms that are measured and audited.

Research on ethical climate and organizational justice indicates that consistent enforcement of norms strengthens shared perceptions of fairness and reduces deviance (Newman et al., 2020). Conversely, perceived impunity undermines deterrence and reinforces destructive norms.

Accountability must therefore be systemic, not discretionary.

4.2.2 Metric Reform: "What You Measure Becomes What You Tolerate."

Climate is shaped by performance metrics. When output metrics dominate and psychosocial

indicators are absent, leaders infer that results override relational cost.

Organizations should rebalance evaluation systems to include:

Turnover and retention indicators.

Psychosocial risk metrics (e.g., strain, burnout trends).

Voice and psychological safety indicators.

Documented retaliation cases and resolution outcomes.

Evidence from climate and HRM research demonstrates that aligned performance management systems influence behavioral norms and reduce risk behaviors (Schneider et al., 2017; Wang & Liu, 2024). Penalizing "results at any cost" patterns communicates that coercive productivity is not an acceptable currency.

4.2.3 Work Design Fixes

Structural ambiguity fuels hostile climates. Longitudinal research shows that role ambiguity predicts later bullying and mistreatment, particularly when supportive leadership is low (Hauge et al., 2011; Li et al., 2024). Clear role definitions, workload balance, and access to supervisory support are preventative mechanisms rather than cosmetic improvements. They reduce interpretive ambiguity, interpersonal friction, and competitive threat, all antecedents of hostile climate development.

4.2.4 Build Protective Macro-Climates: Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC)

Psychosocial Safety Climate refers to shared perceptions that senior management prioritizes psychological health and safety (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Extensive PSC research demonstrates that strong PSC reduces psychosocial hazards such as bullying, harassment, and excessive job demands (Dollard et al., 2017; Idris et al., 2023). Psychosocial Safety Climate operates at the organizational level, shaping downstream climates within units. When psychological health is explicitly prioritized at the executive level, tolerance for intimidation decreases and reporting mechanisms strengthen.

Building PSC requires:

Visible senior leadership commitment

Resource allocation toward psychological safety

Integration of health and safety into strategic objectives

4.2.5 Unit-Level Reset and Norm Rebuilding

Where destructive climates are already entrenched, incremental change may be insufficient. Contaminated climates require structured reset processes.

Effective reset interventions include:

Facilitated team-based norm renegotiation.

Structured conflict management capability development.

Leadership alignment around sanction consistency and support practices.

Longitudinal monitoring of climate indicators.

Climate is dynamic and socially reinforced; it cannot be repaired through a one-time survey or workshop. Research on climate strength suggests that norms become entrenched through repeated reinforcement, meaning that sustained intervention is required for recalibration (Schneider et al., 2017; Ostroff et al., 2022). Longitudinal climate audits not episodic engagement surveys are necessary to detect shifts and prevent regression.

5. Multilevel Framework of Destructive Organizational Climate

We propose a three-level framework as shown in Figure 1. A destructive organizational climate is not reducible to an individual leader's behavior. Rather, it is structurally produced at the organizational level, operationalized within teams, and psychologically internalized at the individual level. Over time, individual adaptations feedback upward, reinforcing or reshaping team norms and broader organizational signals.

5.1 Organizational-Level Drivers: Systems That Manufacture Destructiveness

At the macro level, destructiveness is often structurally enabled. Organizations create incentive architecture that determines whether coercive or supportive leadership becomes adaptive.

5.1.1 Performance Regimes and KPI Extremity

Performance systems function as normative signals. When key performance indicators (KPIs) are narrow, punitive, or extreme, managers may adopt coercive control strategies to secure short-term results, particularly if output metrics overshadow relational conduct (Schneider et al., 2017; Wang & Liu, 2024). Research on performance pressure demonstrates that extreme target systems increase

the likelihood of unethical behavior and interpersonal hostility when moral safeguards are weak (Mitchell et al., 2018; Ordóñez et al., 2009). Under such regimes, intimidation can become instrumentally rational rather than deviant.

5.1.2 HR Practices and Accountability Architecture

Accountability structures communicate ethical boundaries. Weak reporting systems, opaque investigations, inconsistent sanctioning, and retaliation risk create climates of impunity (Newman et al., 2020). Organizational justice research consistently shows that low procedural fairness predicts deviance and retaliatory behavior (Colquitt et al., 2013). When employees perceive that complaints are unsafe or futile, silence becomes a rational adaptation (Morrison, 2023).

Thus, accountability architecture is not an administrative background. it is climate infrastructure.

5.1.3 Work Design Stressors

Chronic role ambiguity and role conflict generate conditions ripe for hostility and scapegoating. Longitudinal evidence indicates that role ambiguity predicts subsequent bullying over extended time lags (Hauge et al., 2011). More recent multilevel findings suggest that role ambiguity may operate through hostile work climate, particularly when supportive leadership is low (Li et al., 2024). Under ambiguity, uncertainty becomes interpersonal blame replaces clarity. Clear role structures and supportive supervision are therefore preventive mechanisms, not cosmetic adjustments.

5.1.4 Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) as a Protective Macro-Signal

Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) captures shared perceptions that senior management prioritizes psychological health and safety (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). PSC functions as a macro-level signal shaping the downstream unit climate. Multilevel research demonstrates that strong PSC reduces exposure to bullying and buffers the relationship between job stressors and harassment (Dollard et al., 2017; Idris et al., 2023). When psychological safety is institutionally prioritized, coercive behavior becomes normatively incongruent.

5.2 Unit-Level Climate Constructs: The Proximal Engine

While macro systems establish structural conditions, destructiveness becomes tangible at the team level. Units are where daily interaction patterns are learned and reinforced.

Key proximal climates include:

Abusive supervision climate shared perceptions that supervisory abuse characterizes the unit (Priesemuth et al., 2014).

Hostile work climate shared perceptions of antagonism and interpersonal aggression (Harvey et al., 2021).

Bullying-permissive climates implicit tolerance of mistreatment.

Low supportive leadership climates contexts where stressors are unbuffered, increasing the translation of strain into hostility (Li et al., 2024).

Research shows abusive supervision climate predicts collective deviance, team withdrawal, and reduced performance beyond individual abuse exposure (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Zhao & Liao, 2023). Unit climates are proximal because they shape immediate survival rules. This is where employees learn what is safe, rewarded, or dangerous.

5.3 Individual-Level Mechanisms: How Climate Gets Under the Skin

Macro and unit climates exert impact when they are psychologically internalized. Meta-analytic evidence links destructive leadership to strain, reduced job satisfaction, diminished commitment, and counterproductive behavior (Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2023).

We highlight three mechanisms that render climate-level harm durable:

5.3.1 Social Information Processing and Sensemaking

Under ambiguity, employees rely on environmental cues and shared interpretations to construct meaning (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Repeated mistreatment forms collective narratives: "this is normal here." Climate strength amplifies this effect when perceptions are widely shared, norm enforcement becomes self-sustaining (Schneider et al., 2017).

5.3.2 Identity and Collective Efficacy Erosion

Abusive supervision climate erodes group identification and collective efficacy (Priesemuth et

al., 2014). Reduced identity weakens cooperation; diminished efficacy undermines coordinated effort (Harvey et al., 2021). As team cohesion declines, performance and engagement deteriorate in parallel.

5.3.3 Threat and Defensive Adaptation

Destructive climates activate threat responses. Employees adopt defensive strategies such as silence, impression management, disengagement, and retaliatory aggression (Morrison, 2023; Bedi & Schat, 2023). Destructive leadership is positively associated with counterproductive work behaviors and revenge-oriented responses (Mackey et al., 2017). These adaptations are contextually rational but collectively destabilizing. Silence suppresses corrective feedback. Withdrawal weakens cohesion. Retaliation escalates conflict. Individual adaptation becomes collective reinforcement.

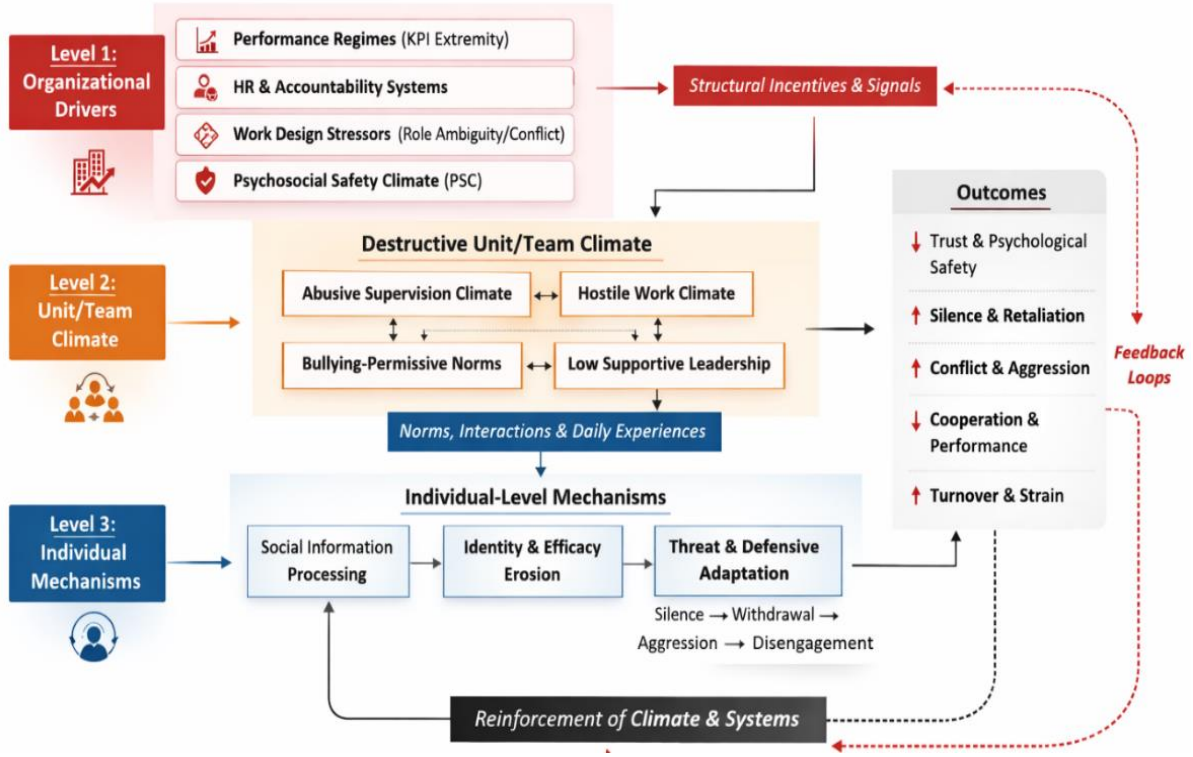

Figure 1. Multilevel framework of destructive organizational climate

6. Conclusion

Destructive organizational climate represents the missing middle between "bad leaders" and "bad outcomes." While leader behavior remains a powerful predictor of employee strain, deviance, and disengagement, it does not operate in isolation. It is amplified, normalized, and sustained within climates shaped by performance systems, HR accountability structures, work design stressors, and executive priorities. The accumulated evidence is clear. Climate-level constructs—most notably abusive supervision climate- predict health, behavioral, and performance outcomes above and beyond individual exposure to mistreatment (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Zhao & Liao, 2023). Employees do not need to be directly targeted to experience harm; ambient hostility produces anticipatory stress and defensive adaptation. Furthermore, emerging multilevel research demonstrates that hostile climates mediate the relationship between structural stressors (e.g., role ambiguity) and bullying over extended time lags, particularly when supportive leadership is absent (Li et al., 2024). This temporal dimension underscores that destructive climates are not episodic disruptions, they are developmental processes.

Conceptually, this reframing shift destructive leadership from an individual pathology model to an ecological systems model. Leaders may initiate harm, but organizational climates determine whether that harm is isolated, corrected, normalized, or institutionalized. Climate operates as both amplifier and stabilizer. Through shared

sensemaking, identity erosion, silence, and defensive adaptation, destructive norms become self-reinforcing. For management and human resource practice, the implication is direct. Leader-focused remediation training, coaching, or removal addresses symptoms when structural incentives remain misaligned. Sustainable change requires climate governance:

Redesigning accountability systems to eliminate impunity and retaliation.

Reforming metrics to ensure that "results" are not decoupled from relational and psychosocial cost.

Strengthening psychosocial safety climate at the executive level to signal that psychological health is a strategic priority (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Idris et al., 2023).

Implementing structured unit-level norm rebuilding and longitudinal monitoring rather than episodic surveys.

In ecological terms, organizations must alter the conditions under which destructive behavior is functional. When coercion, intimidation, or silence no longer serve performance or reputational interests and when psychological safety is structurally reinforced, destructive leadership becomes maladaptive rather than instrumental.

The broader contribution of this framework is theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it integrates destructive leadership research with climate science and multilevel organizational theory. Practically, it moves intervention away from episodic leader correction toward systemic design reform.

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