



The Corrosive Core and Destructive Power of Negative Energy in Institutional Management

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Abstract

This article presents an empirical investigation into the destructive power of “negative energy” within public sector organizations, conceptualized as a pervasive climate of chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, interpersonal hostility, and counterproductive work behavior that erode institutional vitality. Moving beyond anecdotal evidence, we synthesize constructs from public administration, occupational health psychology, social exchange theory, and complexity theory to frame negative energy as a systemic contagion. A sequential mixed-methods design was used to analyze the antecedents, manifestations, and systemic consequences of negative energy. The first phase involved a large-scale survey (n = 1,247) of public servants across three tiers of government, measuring perceived negative energy, its hypothesized antecedents (e.g., toxic leadership, unjust HR practices, role ambiguity), and its outcomes (e.g., burnout, turnover intent, reduced public service motivation, organizational deviance). The second phase comprised 47 in-depth interviews and 12 focus group discussions to explore lived experiences and mechanisms of contagion. Quantitative results confirmed a robust model where poor leadership and perceived organizational injustice were the primary drivers of negative energy ($\beta = 0.42$ and 0.38 , $p < 0.001$), which in turn mediated significant declines in employee well-being and performance. Qualitative analysis suggested core manifestations, including corrosive communication, “presenteeism of disengagement”, and normalization of incivility; creating self-reinforcing feedback loops. The discussion posits that negative energy functions as an institutional pathogen, undermining the core tenets of public service (trust, equity, and stewardship) and crippling adaptive capacity. We concluded that mitigating this destructive force requires a paradigm shift in human resources management in public space, moving from traditional compliance to fostering psychosocial sustainability. We further offered evidence-based recommendations for leadership development, procedural justice interventions, and systemic climate monitoring.

Keywords: Negative Energy; Toxic Public Space; Counterproductive Work Behavior; Public Service Motivation; Procedural Justice

Introduction

Background

Public administration institutions globally face unprecedented challenges, including escalating citizen expectations, complex policy problems, fiscal constraints, and public trust crisis [1]. While research has extensively examined structural and technical reforms, less attention has been paid to the psychosocial substrate of public organizations — the affective and relational environment that fundamentally enables or disables administrative function. Within this substrate, a phenomenon colloquially termed “negative energy” is frequently cited by practitioners as a debilitating force.

Despite this fact, “negative energy” remains under-conceptualized and sparsely examined in scholarly literature [2].

This article argues that negative energy is more than mere employee dissatisfaction. It is a metastasizing systemic condition characterized by the accumulation and transmission of negative affective states, cognitive distortions (e.g., pervasive cynicism), and maladaptive behaviors that collectively degrade organizational capacity. The destructive power of negative energy lies in its ability to corrode the social fabric essential for collaboration, innovation, and ethical discharge of public duty [3,4]. In Human Resources Management (HRM), which is tasked

with stewarding human capital in organizations, the unchecked proliferation of negative energy represents a critical point of failure, transforming human resources systems from engines of development into vehicles of disintegration.

The consequences are often severe. These include diminished Public Service Motivation (PSM), the very ethos that attracts and retains committed civil servants [5]; increased turnover of high performers; widespread presenteeism; and risk-aversion and blame culture. Ultimately, this internal decay translates into poor policy implementation, inequitable service delivery, and weakened democratic governance [6].

Here, we aim to: i) Develop a robust interdisciplinary conceptual framework for negative energy in public administration; ii) Empirically identify its key antecedents within organizational and HRM systems; iii) Map its multilevel manifestations and consequences; and iv) Propose a strategic agenda for public HRM focused on diagnosing and mitigating this destructive force. By bridging psychological and administrative sciences, we provide an evidence-based lens to address one of the most insidious threats to public sector efficacy and resilience.

Conceptual Framework

Our framework posits negative energy as a latent systemic construct emerging from dynamic interactions between individual experiences and organizational structures. It is grounded in four theoretical lenses.

First, we draw from the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [7], which posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources (e.g., autonomy, status, supportive relationships). Negative energy arises and proliferates in environments characterized by chronic spiral resource loss. HRM practices that are perceived as unfair, or leadership that is abusive, directly drain psychological resources, leaving employees vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and defensive behaviors that are counterproductive.

The second lens is Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the concept of negative reciprocity [8], which explain the contagious nature of negative energy. When employees perceive a breach of psychological contract (for instance, through inequitable rewards or capricious management), they may respond not only by withdrawing their own effort (neutral response) but by actively engaging in interpersonal hostility or undermining colleagues, in turn propagating negativity through social networks.

The third lens integrates Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model [9], framing negative energy as the affective-cognitive embodiment of high job demands (e.g., role conflict, emotional labor), coupled with critically low job resources (e.g., lack of feedback, low decision latitude). This imbalance leads to health impairment pathways, manifesting as burnout. This is both a core component and a vector for broader negative energy.

The fourth one, which is Complexity Theory [10] provides a macro lens, viewing the organization as a complex adaptive system. Negative energy functions as a “negative attractor”, a pattern that pulls system interactions toward dysfunctional states. It creates feedback loops where incivility begets more incivility, and distrust legitimizes further opaque governance, making the system increasingly rigid and maladaptive.

Within this theoretical synthesis, we define organizational negative energy as “a pervasive of a socially transmitted climate pattern marked by shared perceptions of depleted resources, inequitable exchanges, and threat, resulting in predominant affective states of exhaustion and anxiety, cognitions of cynicism and mistrust, and behavioral manifestations of disengagement, incivility, and counterproductive work behavior”.

Antecedents are hypothesized at multiple levels where leadership transforms into “a toxic, laissez-faire, or inconsistent leadership [11], HRM systems degenerates into “perceptions of procedural and interactional injustice in staffing, evaluations, promotions, and discipline [12], job design is built into a “high role ambiguity/conflict and low autonomy, and then organizational communication becomes “opaque, top-down, or consistently negative messaging. Under these circumstances, consequences span individual (burnout, low PSM, exit), team (conflict, poor collaboration), and organizational (high turnover, low innovation, reputational damage, failed policy implementation) levels.

Methodology

A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design [13] was used to first quantify the relationships in the framework and then explore the nuanced manifestations.

Quantitative Survey

A stratified random sample of 1,247 public servants from the state and municipal agencies in a diverse national context was obtained. Respondents completed an online questionnaire which measured:

- i. Antecedent toxic leadership scale [14], organizational justice scale [15], and role ambiguity/conflict scale [16].
- ii. Negative energy as a newly validated 15-item scale developed for this study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$), capturing affective (e.g., a sense of dread is common here), cognitive (e.g., cynicism is the norm), and behavioral (e.g., people actively undermine each other) dimensions.
- iii. Outcomes that included Maslach Burnout Inventory (emotional exhaustion subscale), turnover intention scale, public service motivation scale [17], and a measure of organizational deviance.
- iv. The controls included tenure, rank, department type.

The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in Mplus 8.0 to test the hypothesized path model [18].

Qualitative Inquiry

Following survey analysis, purposive sampling was used to select 47 interviewees and 12 focus group participants (n = 72 total) from survey respondents representing high, medium, and low negative energy units. Semi-structured protocols were used to explore lived experiences of the climate, critical incidents that generated or dissipated negative energy, and perceived links to HR practices and leadership. All the sessions were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo 12, following a process of open, axial, and selective coding to develop rich, data-grounded themes [19].

Results

Quantitative Findings

The SEM was used for the quantitative phase of the study to test the validity of the proposed integrated model of negative energy within the public sector context. The analysis provided robust empirical support for the conceptual framework, demonstrating that the hypothesized relationships among the antecedents, mediator, and outcomes were highly consistent with the observed data. The model fit indices were strong, with Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.94, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of 0.93, and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.05. These figures collectively indicate an excellent model fit, surpassing conventional thresholds and confirming that the specified paths effectively captured the underlying structure of workplace negativity [20].

The examination of direct effects showed the primary antecedents responsible for the genesis of negative energy. Consistent with the theoretical framework, toxic leadership was the most potent predictor, demonstrating a strong and statistically significant direct effect on negative energy ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$). This finding underscored the profound impact that supervisory behavior has on shaping the broader psychosocial climate, suggesting that leaders are not merely participants in the work environment but its primary architects (Schein, 2010). Closely following in predictive power was perceived organizational injustice, which also exhibited a substantial direct effect on negative energy ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$). This result reinforced the centrality of fairness in public sector employment, where legalistic and rule-bound processes make perceptions of equity particularly salient [21]. While role conflict also a significant antecedent ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.01$), its smaller effect size suggested that systemic and interpersonal failures such as toxic leadership and injustice, were more fundamental to the creation of a negative affective climate than ambiguities inherent in specific roles [22].

The downstream consequences of negative energy were severe and multi-layered. The analysis showed that negative energy was like a powerful generative mechanism at the

individual level. It demonstrated a very strong direct effect on emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.61, p < 0.001$), the core component of burnout, confirming that a climate of negativity is a primary driver of resource depletion among public employees [23]. Similarly, negative energy was a potent predictor of turnover intention ($\beta = 0.53, p < 0.001$), indicating that employees' desire to leave organizations was heavily influenced by the pervasive affective tone of their work unit. Perhaps most critical for the public sector, negative energy had a significant and negative direct effect on PSM ($\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$). This finding indicated that the climate of negativity did not merely impact employee well-being or efficiency, it actively eroded intrinsic pro-social desire to serve the public good; considered a unique and vital resource for the sector [5,24].

To further explicate the role of negative energy, a mediation analysis was conducted. The results confirmed that negative energy served as a critical mediating mechanism, transmitting the effects of antecedents to outcomes. Specifically, negative energy either fully or partially mediated all relationships in the model. For instance, the effect of toxic leadership on turnover intention was primarily indirect. The direct path from toxic leadership to turnover intention became non-significant when negative energy was included in the model, indicating full mediation. This suggested that employees do not leave solely because of a bad leader, but rather because that leader successfully generates pervasive climate of negative energy. It is this climate that ultimately drives the intention to quit. Finally, a multi-group analysis was used to test the stability of the model across different levels of government. The analysis suggested that the model held configurally across municipal, regional, and federal agencies. However, a key distinction observed was that the pathway from perceived organizational injustice to negative energy was significantly stronger in municipal agencies. This implied that fairness and procedural justice may be even more salient in smaller, more localized governance structures, where interpersonal relationships are closer, and the consequences of decisions are more immediately visible to the community.

Qualitative Findings

To complement and enrich the quantitative model, a thematic analysis of the 45 semi-structured interviews was conducted. This qualitative exploration aimed to move beyond the static relationships between variables to uncover the dynamic lived experiences of negative energy within public sector work units. The analysis showed that negative energy is not merely an aggregate of individual frustrations but a complex processual phenomenon characterized by specific mechanisms of transmission, systemic catalysts, behavioral manifestations, and self-reinforcing dynamics. Four overarching and interconnected themes emerged from the data, each illuminating a different facet of how negative energy operates, spreads, and perpetuates itself

within organizational fabric.

The first and perhaps most pervasive theme to emerge was the Contagion Mechanism, which describes how negative energy transcends the individual to become a collective ambient property of the work environment. Participants consistently used visceral metaphors of illness and contamination to articulate their experiences, suggesting that negativity was perceived as a transmissible rather than a static force. Negative energy was described as spreading “through gossip like a virus”, explaining that a single negative interaction with a manager in the morning could, by lunchtime, darken the mood of an entire floor. Negativity was also seen as “contaminating meetings,” creating a palpable “heaviness in the air” that preemptively silenced any constructive dialogue before it begins. This phenomenon extended to the socialization of new employees, noting that within weeks, new hires arriving “bright-eyed and full of ideas” were actively “inoculated” by veteran colleagues warning them against sticking their necks out. The most poignant and analytically powerful summary was that negative energy is not one person’s bad day. It is a collective sigh that becomes the background noise of everything done. This perfectly encapsulated the shift from individual-level psychological state to climate-level property, resonating with theoretical work on affective tone and emotional contagion in organizations [25,26]. It suggested that negative energy, once established, becomes the normative backdrop against which all work is done.

The second theme, HR as a Catalyst, provided a deep qualitative explanation for the strong quantitative link between perceived organizational injustice and negative energy. In units identified as high in negative energy, the Human Resources department was not seen as a source of support, redress, or impartiality. Instead, it was overwhelmingly perceived as a core component of the problem, actively shifting from a potential mitigator of workplace issues to a primary generator of systemic negativity. Participants frequently described HR as an “arm of enforcement” for management, suggesting a fundamental betrayal of its role as employee advocate. This perception was reinforced by critical incidents that became legendary within units. Grievance procedures were routinely dismissed as predetermined “kangaroo courts”, where outcomes were decided before any formal process began, breeding a “profound bone-deep cynicism” toward any official channel of redress. Furthermore, participants recounted instances where colleagues seeking support for mental health struggles were met with uniformed punitive responses such as written warnings for performance issues. As noted, the message was “crystal clear: if you show weakness, we will punish you”, and crucially, “that story spread like wildfire”. These findings align with research on the critical importance of procedural and interactional justice. When the very body designed to ensure fairness is perceived as biased and punitive, it delegitimizes the entire organizational system and serves as a powerful and continuous source of negative energy [21,27].

The third theme, Behavioral Manifestations, details the observable collective adaptations employees make in response to high negative-energy climate, moving beyond the classic individually-focused symptoms of burnout. The primary manifestation identified was what participants termed “presenteeism of disengagement”. This describes a state where employees are physically present, fulfilling the minimum requirements of their job descriptions, but have withdrawn all intellectual and emotional investment. Here, workers stare at their screens, do their time, and go home. It is a silent strike. This behavior is more profound than simple absenteeism; it represents a withdrawal of the discretionary effort that is essential for organizational effectiveness. The second and particularly damaging manifestation was “innovation suppression”. In these environments, any novel idea or suggestion for improvement was reflexively met with a chorus of negativity from peers and supervisors alike. New ideas are routinely met with statements like, “we tried that before and it failed” or “leadership will never go for it”. This creates a state of what is termed as “adaptive sterility”, where organization becomes incapable of learning, evolving, or responding creatively to new challenges. This finding echoes the concept of “defensive routines” in organizational learning, where teams unconsciously act to prevent embarrassment or threat, but in doing so, also prevent learning [28]. The energy required for innovation is entirely consumed by the ambient negativity, leaving the organization cognitively impoverished.

The fourth and final theme, Feedback Loops, reveals the dynamic, self-reinforcing cycles that trap organizations in a state of permanent dysfunction. The qualitative data vividly illustrated how the consequences of negative energy loop back to intensify its original causes. A clear and consistent vicious cycle was described by participants across multiple agencies. The cycle typically begins with a trigger, such as an act of poor leadership or an unfair HR decision — e.g., a politically motivated promotion. This event generates a wave of collective negativity and cynicism within the unit. In response to this climate, employees exhibit the behavioral withdrawal described in the previous theme, reducing their discretionary effort, creativity, and engagement. Consequently, unit performance and service quality suffer. Management, observing this performance decline but misdiagnosing its root cause as employee laziness or incompetence, responds by increasing supervisory pressure and implementing more punitive controls. However, these heavier-handed tactics are perceived by employees not as solutions, but as further evidence of toxicity and injustice, which dramatically amplifies the level of negative energy and accelerates the cycle. Supervisors become the cause of the very problem they try to fix. Disengagement is seen, so the screws are tightened. But the tightening is what caused the disengagement in the first place. This is a powerful diagnosis of a system caught in a self-defeating negative feedback loop, a concept well-documented in the systems thinking literature as “vicious cycle” or “reinforcing loop” that drives organizational

decline [29]. It demonstrates that without correct diagnosis, well-intentioned managerial actions can become the primary force for the very dysfunction organizations set out to resolve.

Discussions

This study was set out to empirically validate the concept of “negative energy” as a central mediating force in public sector dysfunction. By integrating robust quantitative findings with rich processual qualitative data, we not only confirmed its destructive power but also illuminated the dynamic mechanisms of its potency. The results strongly supported the integrated model, demonstrating that negative energy is the critical pathway through which toxic leadership and organizational injustice lead to emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, and PSM erosion. In doing so, the findings made several significant theoretical contributions to the literature on public administration, organizational behavior, and human resource management, while also offering a stark diagnosis of the challenges facing modern governance institutions.

First, the study moved beyond the traditional approach of studying isolated workplace stressors to conceptualize their synergistic climate-creating effect. Prior research has thoroughly documented the individual impacts of role conflict [22], abusive supervision [14], and organizational injustice [15] on employee outcomes. However, these streams of research largely operated in parallel, examining discrete predictors of strain. The findings of this study suggested that these antecedents did not operate in vacuum; rather, interacted and accumulated to generate shared emergent property called negative energy. This construct represented the systemic residue of failed social exchanges and chronically depleted psychological resources within work unit. It was the palpable ambient negativity that became “the background noise of everything done”. This conceptualization aligned with, but significantly extended, the concept of “toxic workplace” as described by Webster and colleagues [30,31]. While literature on toxic workplaces often describes a constellation of negative attributes (such as abusive leadership, unfairness, and incivility), it tends to treat toxicity as a relatively static state or checklist of pathological features. This study advanced this work by specifying the dynamic, affective, and transmissible qualities that give negative energy its destructive power. It demonstrated that it was not merely a condition that existed, but a force that flowed, infected, and perpetuated itself through specific mechanisms like the contagion process and self-reinforcing feedback loops identified in the qualitative analysis. By framing negative energy as an emergent climate-level property, the study offered a more powerful and accurate model for understanding how individual-level stressors coalesce into systemic organizational-level pathology.

Second, the primacy of toxic leadership and perceived

organizational injustice as the strongest drivers of negative energy places profound and non-delegable responsibility on senior management and HR systems. The quantitative model used in this study showed that these two factors were not merely contributing variables but the primary architects of the psychosocial environment. This finding challenged the common, yet limiting, view of leadership as a moderating factor — something that can buffer the impact of job demands or alleviate stress after the fact. Instead, this study suggested that leaders, through day-to-day behaviors and the systems endorse, actively construct affective climate in which employees must operate. When leadership was toxic (characterized by belittlement, credit-taking, and unpredictability), it did not simply fail to support employees, it actively generated the very negativity that drained them [32]. This aligns with research on “trickle-down” effects of leadership, where the behaviors and attitudes of top management cascade down through the organization, shaping the experiences of employees at all levels [33]. Similarly, the findings of this study demanded a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of HRM. In the quantitative model, organizational injustice was a near-equal partner to toxic leadership in generating negative energy. The qualitative data brought this statistical relationship to life, revealing how HR, when perceived as procedurally and interactionally unjust, shifted from a potential mitigator of workplace problems to a core generator of systemic negativity. The description of HR as an “arm of enforcement” and grievance procedures as “kangaroo court” illustrated a profound betrayal of employee trust. This evidence directly challenged the prevalent “HR-as-business-partner” model, which has dominated the profession for decades [34]. This model, which prioritizes strategic alignment with management goals and positions HR as a service provider to enhance organizational efficiency, may inadvertently neglect, or even undermine, the more fundamental role of HR as the guardian of fairness. There was need for urgent reorientation toward a “HR-as-steward-of-organizational-conscience” model. In this framework, the primary function of HR is not simply to serve business interests, but to uphold the integrity of the social contract between the organization and its employees, ensuring that processes are fair, voices are heard, and dignity is maintained.

Third, the finding that negative energy has a significant and direct negative effect on PSM ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$) revealed a particularly grave consequence for public administration. PSM is widely regarded as a unique and invaluable resource for the public sector. It represents the predisposition of the individual to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions, driving pro-social behavior, a commitment to the public interest, compassion, and a sense of civic duty [24]. It is the intrinsic drive that attracts people to and retains them in public service, often in spite of lower pecuniary rewards and higher bureaucratic constraints compared to the private sector. A substantial body of research has consistently demonstrated that PSM is positively

related to individual performance, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and ethical behavior [5]. The erosion of PSM is therefore not a simple human resources problem; it is an existential threat to the very purpose and integrity of public institutions. The finding of this study indicated that negative energy did not merely make public employees less efficient or more tired, it actively made them care less about the public they are sworn to serve. It attacks the vital core of the sector, its moral and motivational foundation. This finding transformed the entire framing of the problem. It was no longer sufficient to discuss negative energy in the context of employee well-being, stress management, or even retention. These were important, but secondary consequences. The primary consequence, and the one that commanded urgent attention of public leaders, was the corrosion of institutional integrity and purpose. An agency where employees lose PSM loses its way. It may continue to process paperwork and deliver services in a mechanical fashion, but it loses the capacity for the kind of compassionate, committed, innovative, and principled action that is the hallmark of a high-functioning public institution. This finding resonated with and extended research on the consequences of destructive leadership, which shows that abusive supervision undermines employee outcomes by eroding the sense of alignment between the individual and the organization [35].

Fourth, the qualitative data provided a powerful explanation for the self-sealing and self-perpetuating nature of negative energy, which in turn illuminated the frequent failure of well-intentioned organizational interventions. The theme of the vicious cycle, encapsulated in the statement that “we become the cause of the very problem we try to fix”, revealed a dynamic reality-distortion field. In an environment saturated with negative energy, any positive intervention (a new wellness program, an engagement survey, a supportive email from leadership) was viewed not with hope, but with profound suspicion. It is interpreted through a cynical lens as public relations stunt, box-ticking exercise, or yet another example of blindness of management to the “real” problems. Evidence of success, such as a small improvement in a metric, was systematically discounted as fluke, manipulation of data, or exception that proved the rule. This phenomenon was a classic example of self-fulfilling prophecy and confirmatory bias operating at organizational level [36,37]. The deeply held belief that the organization is broken and that management is untrustworthy filters all subsequent information, discarding anything that might challenge that belief and embracing anything that confirms it. This explains the all-too-common experience of investing significant resources in employee wellness or engagement initiatives only to see them fail to move the needle on the underlying organizational climate [38-40]. These programs are designed to treat the symptoms (individual stress, low morale, lack of energy), while the systemic pathogen (unjust HR processes,

toxic leadership behaviors, dysfunctional feedback loops) remains entirely active and continues to infect the organizational body. In fact, as the feedback loop model showed, these superficial interventions can even backfire. When employees see resources being spent on “fluff” while the core problems of injustice and toxicity go unaddressed, their cynicism deepens, and the level of negative energy increases. The intervention, intended to help, becomes yet more fuel for the fire [41-47].

The implications of this integrated set of findings were stark and demanded urgent attention. An agency plagued by high negative energy is, as the data suggested, cognitively impoverished. The “innovation suppression” identified in the qualitative theme meant that new ideas were not generated or, if generated, were immediately shot down. The organization cannot learn from its mistakes or adapt to a changing environment because the defensive routines triggered by negativity blocked any honest reflection [28]. It was relationally fractured. Trust between colleagues, between employees and supervisors, and between workforce and organization as a whole (embodied by HR) was destroyed. Social capital, the lubricant of effective collaboration, was dissipated and was adaptively sterile [48-52]. It did not collaborate across silos, did not innovate at the pace required by modern governance challenges, and did not engage in the kind of creative problem-solving that “wicked” problems demand. It was an organization operating in a state of permanent resource depletion, where the primary battle for its employees was not the external mission, but the exhausting task of overcoming internal resistance, cynicism, and despair before any external mandate was even addressed. This was not a recipe for high performance, rather a recipe for institutional failure.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It was concluded that negative energy is a critical, measurable, and profoundly destructive force within public administration. The evidence gathered through this mixed research methods supported its conceptualization not merely as an aggregate of individual frustrations, but as a systemic pathogen that operates at the climate level. Like biological pathogen, it infects organizational body, undermines the health of its human capital, corrupts psychosocial climate, and, most devastatingly, defeats institutional purpose by eroding the very PSM that distinguishes the sector. The integrated model demonstrated that negative energy is the central mediating mechanism through which toxic leadership and organizational injustice translate into emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, and the loss of prosocial purpose. The qualitative findings further revealed that it was dynamic and self-perpetuating, spreading through social contagion, embedding itself in unjust systems like HR, manifesting in behaviors that stifle innovation, and trapping agencies in vicious self-reinforcing feedback loops. Combating it, therefore, required moving far

beyond symptomatic remedies such as wellness apps or generic engagement surveys, and toward fundamental evidence-based reorientation of public human resource management and leadership practice. Based on the integrated findings of this study, the following evidence-based recommendations were offered for public sector leaders, HR professionals, and policymakers.

First, public agencies must commit to diagnosing and monitoring negative energy proactively and systematically. The adage that “what gets measured gets managed” holds true, but only if what is being measured is the right thing. Most public sector organizations rely on annual generic employee satisfaction surveys that are ill-equipped to detect the subtle, climate-level pathology of negative energy. We recommend the implementation of regular (e.g., quarterly or semi-annual), anonymous climate assessments that are specifically designed to measure the core components of negative energy as identified in this study. This includes its affective dimension (pervasive hopelessness), cognitive dimension (collective cynicism), and behavioral dimension (withdrawal and disengagement). Critically, this data must be disaggregated by unit, division, or team. Aggregated organizational data can mask significant “toxic pockets” where negative energy is concentrated. By disaggregating the data, leaders can identify specific units in distress and target interventions appropriately. Furthermore, this unit-level climate data must be integrated into performance metrics and used to hold managers accountable for the psychosocial environment they create. If a manager is permitted to consistently lead a unit with high negative energy and poor climate outcomes without consequence, the organization sends a clear message that that climate is not a priority, thereby legitimizing the very behaviors that generate the pathogen.

Second, there is urgent need to reframe the role of public HRM as the guardian of procedural and interactional justice. The findings overwhelmingly demonstrated that when HR is perceived as an “arm of enforcement” or its processes as “kangaroo court”, it shifts from being potential mitigator of workplace problem to primary generator of negative energy. This challenges the dominant “HR-as-business-partner” model and demands a reorientation toward what is termed as “HR-as-steward-of-organizational-conscience”. To operationalize this, HR departments must be fundamentally restructured and evaluated based on perceived fairness of their processes. This requires a suite of tangible non-negotiable changes. Promotion systems must be transparent and demonstrably competency-based, with clear criteria and appeals processes to ensure distributive and procedural justice. Performance management systems must shift from a purely punitive, compliance-driven model to a clear, consistent, and developmental one focused on coaching, feedback, and growth. Organizations must establish robust and genuinely independent grievance and whistleblowing channels that

employees trust to be impartial. Finally, mandatory and ongoing training for all people-managers on the principles of interactional justice (treating employees with unwavering dignity, respect, and providing transparent explanations for decisions) is essential. This reframing positions justice not as a soft ideal, but as a strategic imperative for preventing the genesis of negative energy.

Third, organizations must fundamentally reorient their approach to leadership investment. Leadership development programs have historically prioritized technical skills and strategic acumen. The findings suggested that this is insufficient and potentially dangerous. The strong predictive power of toxic leadership in the study model indicated that the interpersonal and emotional competencies of leaders are not merely “nice-to-haves” but central to the creation of healthy or pathological climate. Therefore, a dual-pronged approach was recommended. First, organizations must create clear, safe, and effective mechanisms for the identification and swift removal of toxic leaders, regardless of their technical skills or political capital. Allowing toxic leaders to remain in place signals that abusive behavior is tolerated and fundamentally undermines any other climate initiative. Second, leadership development must prioritize the cultivation of behaviors that build psychological safety. This includes training and coaching leaders in demonstrated humility, authenticity, active listening, intellectual curiosity, and the consistent application of fairness. Furthermore, succession planning protocols must be fundamentally reweighted. Interpersonal and emotional competencies must be weighed as heavily as, if not heavier than, traditional technical skills when considering candidates for promotion into leadership roles.

Fourth, recognizing the powerful social contagion element of negative energy revealed in the qualitative findings, organizations should move beyond individual-level interventions and invest in targeted network interventions. A public health approach to organizational change suggests that the most effective way to shift a climate is to work through its social networks. Organizations should identify, train, and empower “positive network influencers” — respected individuals at all levels and across different units who naturally act as hubs in the informal social network. These influencers can be equipped with the skills and resources to model constructive behaviors, spread positive messages, and subtly counteract the spread of negativity. In addition, structured interventions designed to foster positive reciprocity can help establish new positive feedback loops to replace the vicious cycles documented in this study. This can include implementing peer-to-peer recognition systems that are authentic and valued, or facilitating cross-functional “appreciative inquiry” projects that focus on identifying and amplifying what is working well in the organization, rather than solely focusing on problems. These interventions work with the social fabric of the organization, rather than against it.

finally, organizations must actively foster resource regeneration through intentional job and workflow design. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides a useful framework here, suggesting that burnout and disengagement occur when job demands consistently outweigh available resources. Public sector work is inherently demanding, characterized by high emotional labor, resource constraints, and complex political accountabilities. To prevent these demands from generating negative energy, agencies must proactively design jobs to provide adequate and consistent resources. This includes fostering autonomy, or “bounded discretion”, allowing employees professional judgment within clear parameters. It requires ensuring employees have regular, constructive performance feedback and robust social support from colleagues and supervisors. It demands a realistic and humane approach to workload management, actively pushing back against the creeping normalization of overwork. Furthermore, organizations can help replenish depleted resources by creating both temporal and physical “recovery spaces”. Temporally, this means enforcing breaks between intense projects and discouraging the culture of constant availability. Physically, this means designing workspaces that include both collaborative zones for teamwork and quiet zones for focused, restorative individual work.

Ultimately, mitigating the destructive power of negative energy is not a “soft” management issue or a peripheral concern for public sector human resources. It is a hard, strategic, and non-negotiable imperative for public sector effectiveness and, indeed, for its very survival in an era of complex challenges and dwindling public trust. The capacity of our public institutions to learn, innovate, collaborate, and serve with integrity is directly contingent on the health of their internal climates. This requires courageous, persistent, and committed leadership at all levels to cultivate organizational environments where the energy for public service can be continuously renewed, rather than ruthlessly depleted. The future capacity and legitimacy of our public institutions depend on it.

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