



The Psychological Extraction Cycle: A Qualitative Experiential Analysis of Toxic Work Environments and Employee Resource Depletion in Zimbabwe Workspace.

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Abstract— Contemporary organizations increasingly operate under conditions of sustained pressure, digital intensity, and structural fragmentation. While performance outcomes remain the visible measure of organizational success, the invisible psychological costs borne by employees are often overlooked. This paper introduces and explores the Psychological Extraction Cycle, a qualitative experiential construct describing how toxic and fragmented work environments systematically deplete employees' psychological resources while misinterpreting survival-based behaviors as functionality. Using a qualitative experiential approach grounded in reflective practitioner evidence, lived workplace narratives, and recent organizational psychology research, the study examines how resource depletion manifests through withdrawal, performative compliance, and burnout. The findings suggest that environments lacking psychological safety accelerate extraction dynamics, reinforcing a self-perpetuating cycle of exhaustion and disengagement.

Conversely, psychologically safe environments function as protective systems, buffering resource loss and restoring employee agency. The paper contributes to emerging discourse by reframing burnout not as individual weakness but as an adaptive response to extractive systems. Practical implications for leadership, governance, and organizational design are discussed, emphasizing the need to shift from extractive to regenerative workplace architectures. Against this backdrop, this study adopts a qualitative experiential approach to examine the Psychological Extraction Cycle as it manifests within real organizational contexts. By foregrounding lived experience, reflective practitioner insight, and thematic patterns observed across contemporary workplaces, the paper seeks to deepen understanding of how burnout, disengagement, and performative compliance are produced systemically. In doing so, it aligns with growing calls for person-centred and regenerative organizational models that recognize employee wellbeing as a structural responsibility rather than an individual burden. Ultimately, this paper argues that sustainable organizational performance cannot be achieved through the continued extraction of psychological resources. Instead, it requires a fundamental shift toward regenerative workplace systems that preserve psychological safety, restore agency, and treat human capacity as a finite and strategic asset. The Psychological Extraction Cycle offers both a diagnostic lens and a conceptual tool for identifying hidden workplace harm and reimagining organizational environments capable of supporting long-term human and organizational sustainability.

Keywords— Psychological extraction, psychological safety, toxic workplaces, employee wellbeing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary workplaces are operating within an increasingly volatile convergence of economic uncertainty, technological acceleration, organizational restructuring and heightened performance surveillance. While these forces have intensified productivity expectations, they have simultaneously exposed profound weaknesses in how organizations manage human psychological capacity.

Across sectors, employees report escalating levels of emotional exhaustion, disengagement, cynicism, and a diminishing sense of meaning at work. Recent global evidence suggests that these experiences are no longer episodic but systemic, reflecting structural conditions embedded within modern work environments rather than individual shortcomings (American Psychological Association, 2024; Maslach and Leiter, 2023; Schaufeli, 2024).

Organizational discourse has traditionally framed employee wellbeing and burnout through an individualized lens, emphasizing stress management, resilience training, and personal coping mechanisms. Although such interventions may provide short-term relief, they often fail to address the deeper environmental and relational dynamics that give rise to chronic exhaustion. Emerging research increasingly challenges this paradigm, arguing that burnout should be understood as an adaptive psychological response to prolonged exposure to unhealthy and resource-draining organizational systems rather than as a deficit in individual capacity or motivation (Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024; Newman, Donohue and Eva, 2023; Frazier et al., 2024).

Within this context, many contemporary organizations function less as systems that cultivate human potential and more as extractive structures that quietly consume it. Psychological energy, expressed through motivation, attentional focus, emotional regulation, creativity, and relational engagement has become an implicit organizational resource. Unlike physical or financial capital, psychological resources are rarely acknowledged, measured, or intentionally protected. Instead, employees are increasingly expected to absorb ambiguity, regulate emotional labour, adapt to inconsistent leadership practices, and comply within environments characterized by high pressure and limited psychological safety (Marsh, Perez Vallejos and Spence, 2024; Tarafdar, Cooper and Stich, 2023; Kalischko and Riedl, 2024).

Over time, these cumulative demands erode employees' internal resources and sense of agency. In response, individuals frequently adopt protective strategies such as emotional withdrawal, silence, risk avoidance, and performative compliance. These behaviors are not indicators of engagement or organizational alignment; rather, they represent survival-based adaptations designed to minimize exposure to interpersonal or systemic threat. de Lisser et al., 2025 shows that when employees perceive low psychological safety, they are less likely to voice concerns, challenge decisions, or engage authentically, even when such engagement would benefit organizational outcomes (de Lisser et al., 2025).

The concept of the Psychological Extraction Cycle emerges from these lived realities. It describes a recurring pattern in which psychologically unsafe or fragmented environments systematically deplete employees' psychological resources while simultaneously misinterpreting defensive and survival-based behaviors as evidence



of organizational stability or effectiveness. Silence is mistaken for agreement, endurance for resilience, and reduced visible resistance for commitment. This misinterpretation reinforces managerial confidence in existing workplace systems, legitimizing increased control, heightened performance demands, and intensified monitoring, thereby deepening the cycle of extraction rather than disrupting it.

As extraction intensifies, burnout increasingly becomes normalized across teams and organizations. Emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy spread collectively, weakening both individual wellbeing and organizational capacity.

Research indicates that environments characterized by low psychological safety significantly amplify burnout trajectories, whereas psychologically safe environments function as buffers that preserve psychological resources even under conditions of high demand and limited material resources (Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024; American Psychological Association, 2024).

Psychological safety has therefore emerged as a critical moderating factor in understanding contemporary workplace wellbeing. Environments where individuals feel safe to speak up, express uncertainty, and participate without fear of reprisal demonstrate stronger outcomes related to engagement, resilience, and retention. Conversely, psychologically unsafe environments accelerate extraction by forcing employees to expend disproportionate cognitive and emotional effort on self-protection rather than meaningful contribution (de Lisser et al., 2025).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EXTRACTION CYCLE

The Psychological Extraction Cycle is conceptually grounded in contemporary organizational psychology, particularly theories of psychological safety, conservation of resources, and workplace wellbeing. At its core, the framework reframes employee burnout and disengagement as systemic outcomes of extractive organizational environments rather than individual deficiencies. This framing aligns with a growing body of research arguing that modern work systems increasingly consume psychological resources while neglecting their replenishment (Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024; Newman, Donohue and Eva, 2023; Frazier et al., 2024).

Psychological resources such as emotional energy, attentional capacity, sense of agency, and relational trust are finite. Conservation of resources theory suggests (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Hobfoll, Halbesleben and Neveu, 2023) that individuals strive to protect these resources when faced with prolonged threat or loss, often through withdrawal or defensive coping strategies.

Within psychologically unsafe environments, employees are required to expend disproportionate cognitive and emotional effort simply to maintain stability, regulate interpersonal risk, and avoid negative consequences (American Psychological Association, 2024). Over time, this sustained expenditure leads to depletion, exhaustion, and burnout.

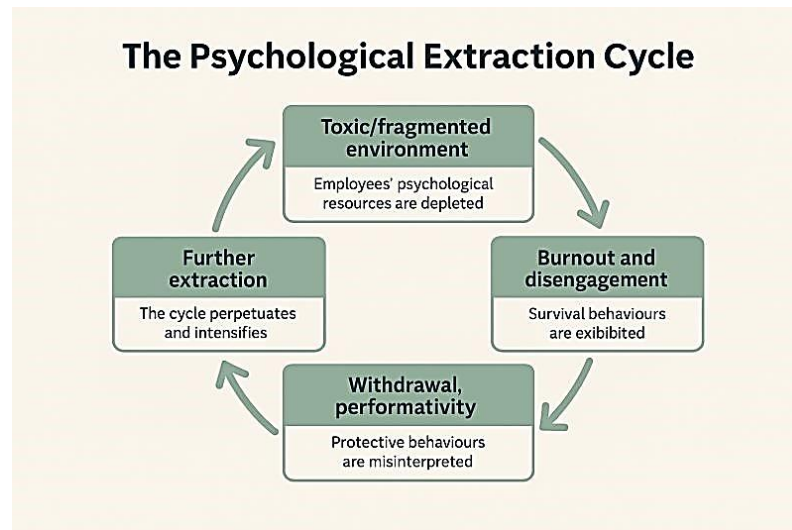


Figure 1: Psychological Extraction Cycle formation

The Psychological Extraction Cycle extends this theoretical foundation by emphasizing the role of the organizational system in driving resource loss. In extractive environments, leadership inconsistency, excessive performance surveillance, unresolved interpersonal conflict, and unclear expectations signal high interpersonal risk. As psychological safety diminishes, employees shift from contribution-oriented behaviors to survival-oriented adaptation. Qualitative research consistently demonstrates that when employees perceive low psychological safety, they become less willing to voice concerns, challenge decisions, or engage authentically, even when silence undermines organizational learning and performance (de Lissier et al., 2025).

A defining feature of the extraction cycle is misinterpretation. Adaptive survival behaviors, such as silence, compliance, emotional restraint, and reduced discretionary effort are frequently read by leadership as indicators of alignment, professionalism, or organizational stability. Instead of prompting inquiry or reflection, these behaviors reinforce confidence in existing systems. This misreading is particularly pronounced in high-pressure and digitally intensified workplaces, where productivity metrics obscure underlying psychological costs (Marsh, Perez Vallejos and Spence, 2024; Tarafdar, Cooper and Stich, 2023; Kalischko and Riedl, 2024).

As a result, organizations often escalate demands through tighter controls, increased monitoring, and heightened performance expectations. Far from correcting dysfunction, these responses intensify extraction by increasing psychological load while further restricting employee agency. This dynamic produces a self-reinforcing loop in which depletion breeds defensive adaptation, adaptation is misread as functionality, and the system responds with greater extraction. Burnout thus emerges not as an anomaly but as an expected outcome of prolonged exposure to extractive conditions (Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024; Newman, Donohue and Eva, 2023; Frazier et al., 2024).

Psychological safety occupies a central moderating position within this conceptual framing. Defined as the shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, psychological safety has repeatedly been shown to

buffer the impact of high demands and resource constraints. Research indicates that psychologically safe environments reduce burnout, protect wellbeing, and sustain engagement even during periods of crisis or organisational strain (American Psychological Association, 2024; Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024). Conversely, its absence accelerates extraction by forcing employees to continuously allocate energy toward self-protection rather than contribution.

Importantly, the Psychological Extraction Cycle challenges dominant organizational narratives that pathologies disengagement or burnout at the individual level. Instead, it positions these outcomes as rational, adaptive responses to structurally unsafe conditions. This reconceptualization aligns with recent calls for person-centred and regenerative workplace models that prioritize human sustainability alongside performance (Beier et al., 2025). From this perspective, wellbeing interventions focused solely on individual resilience are insufficient unless accompanied by systemic redesign aimed at reducing extraction and restoring psychological resources.

In conceptual terms, the Psychological Extraction Cycle therefore functions as both a diagnostic and explanatory framework. Diagnostically, it reveals how silence, compliance, and apparent stability may signal deep organizational fatigue rather than health. Explanatorily, it connects leadership behavior, organizational design, psychological safety, and burnout into a coherent systemic process. By foregrounding environmental causality, the framework expands existing burnout discourse and provides a foundation for shifting organizations from extractive to regenerative modes of operation.

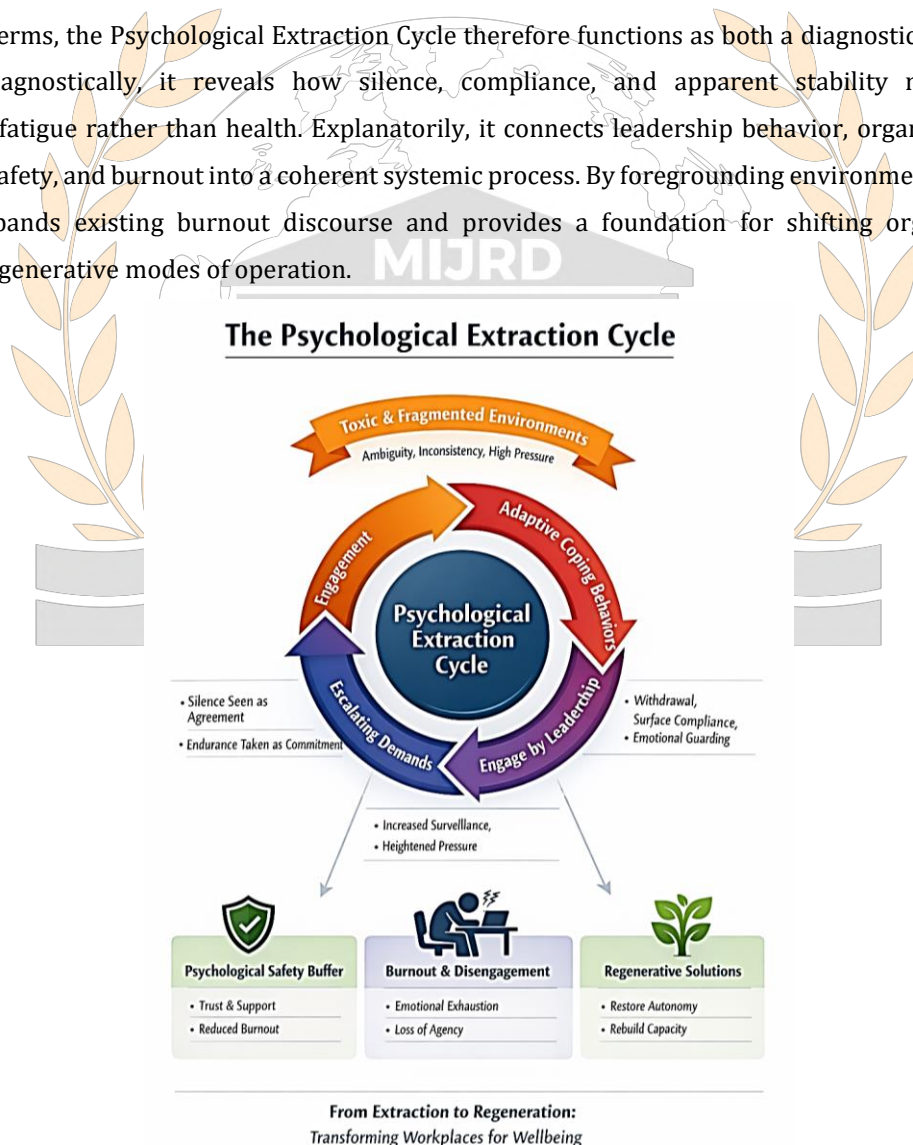


Figure 2. The Psychological Extraction cycle effects



3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative experiential research approach, emphasizing reflective practitioner insight, lived organizational experience, and thematic analysis of recurring workplace patterns. Qualitative experiential research is particularly suited for illuminating complex psychological dynamics that are difficult to quantify but deeply embedded in daily organizational life (Fourie et al., 2024). This study adopts a qualitative experiential research approach, grounded in reflective practitioner inquiry and systematic thematic analysis of lived organizational experience. Such approaches are increasingly recognized as methodologically robust for examining complex, context-dependent psychological and relational phenomena that are not readily captured through quantitative instruments alone. Experiential and reflective methodologies are particularly appropriate in contexts where power dynamics, silence, emotional regulation, and psychological safety shape behaviour in subtle and often unarticulated ways. By foregrounding practitioner insight alongside contemporary organizational psychology scholarship, the study aligns with interpretivist traditions that privilege meaning-making, context sensitivity, and depth over generalizability. Rather than seeking statistical representation, the purpose of this approach is analytical generalization—extending theory by illuminating recurrent patterns, mechanisms, and systemic dynamics observable across organizational settings. Rigor is ensured through reflexive transparency, theoretical triangulation, and consistency with established constructs such as conservation of resources theory and psychological safety. As such, the qualitative experiential design employed in this study is not a methodological limitation but a deliberate and defensible choice aligned with the study's conceptual aims and the nature of the phenomenon under investigation

3.2 Data Sources

Data informing this analysis included:

- Long-term practitioner observation across media and corporate environments
- Reflective narratives and anonymized experiential accounts of employees and leaders
- Integrative synthesis of recent qualitative research on psychological safety, digital work intensity, and burnout (Marsh et al., 2024; de Lisser et al., 2024)

3.3 Analytical Strategy

A reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns of depletion, adaptation, misinterpretation, and systemic reinforcement. Themes were iteratively refined to ensure coherence and alignment with contemporary organizational psychology frameworks.

4. Findings: Core Themes of the Extraction Cycle

4.1 Toxic and Fragmented Environments as Extraction Sites

Participants' experiences consistently revealed environments characterized by ambiguity, leadership inconsistency, and relational strain. Such environments demanded constant self-monitoring and emotional

regulation, rapidly exhausting psychological reserves. These findings align with evidence on digital workplace intensity and techno-strain (Marsh et al., 2024).

4.2 Survival Behaviors and Performative Compliance

Employees responded to sustained threat by minimizing visibility, withholding dissent, and engaging in performative compliance. While outwardly functional, these behaviors masked deep disengagement and loss of agency, echoing findings on psychological safety and voice suppression (de Lisser et al., 2025).

4.3 Misinterpretation and System Escalation

A critical feature of the cycle is systemic misreading. Leaders interpreted silence as agreement and endurance as resilience. This misdiagnosis legitimized increased workload, monitoring, and control, further intensifying extraction rather than addressing root causes.

4.4 Burnout as a Collective Outcome

Burnout emerged not as an isolated phenomenon but as a collective condition marked by emotional fatigue, cynicism, and reduced efficacy. Consistent with recent studies, environments with low psychological safety demonstrated significantly amplified burnout trajectories (Bahadurzada et al., 2024).

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to conceptually and experientially examine the Psychological Extraction Cycle as a systemic phenomenon shaping contemporary workplace experiences. The findings suggest that burnout, disengagement, and performative compliance are not anomalies nor individual pathologies, but predictable outcomes of prolonged exposure to psychologically unsafe and extractive organizational environments. These outcomes are best understood not as failures of resilience, but as rational adaptive responses to sustained psychological threat.

Consistent with recent organizational psychology scholarship, this study reinforces the position that modern work environments increasingly demand continuous emotional regulation, attentional vigilance, and interpersonal self-protection from employees (American Psychological Association, 2024). When these demands remain unacknowledged or unmanaged, psychological resources are steadily depleted. Within such contexts, employees consciously and unconsciously shift from growth-oriented participation toward survival-oriented behavior, prioritizing self-preservation over discretionary contribution.

A critical contribution of the Psychological Extraction Cycle is its illumination of systemic misinterpretation. The findings demonstrate that leadership often misreads silence, compliance, and endurance as indicators of engagement, stability, or cultural alignment. This is highly problematic, as qualitative evidence increasingly shows that silence is more frequently associated with fear, power asymmetry, and low psychological safety than with agreement or commitment (de Lisser et al., 2025). Rather than triggering organizational learning or corrective action, such misinterpretation legitimizes the continuation and escalation of extractive practices.



The escalation phase of the extraction cycle is particularly significant. As organizations respond to perceived stability with increased control, heightened monitoring, and intensified performance expectations, psychological demands increase while perceived autonomy diminishes. Research on digital workplace intensity supports this dynamic, demonstrating that excessive surveillance, hyperconnectivity, and techno-overload amplify psychological strain and accelerate burnout trajectories (Marsh, Perez Vallejos and Spence, 2024). The organization thus becomes locked in a self-reinforcing loop, where extraction is continuously normalized and justified.

Psychological safety emerges as a central moderate variable within this cycle. The discussion aligns strongly with longitudinal evidence indicating that psychological safety provides enduring protective effects against burnout, even under conditions of high demand and limited resources (Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024; Newman, Donohue and Eva, 2023; Frazier et al., 2024). In psychologically safe environments, employees are able to express concerns, surface errors, and negotiate workload boundaries without fear of reprisal, significantly reducing the need for defensive psychological expenditure. In contrast, psychologically unsafe contexts require constant self-monitoring and emotional suppression, accelerating resource depletion.

Importantly, this study challenges dominant organizational narratives that locate burnout solutions at the individual level. While resilience training and wellness initiatives may enhance coping capacity, they are insufficient when structural conditions remain extractive. The Psychological Extraction Cycle reframes wellbeing as an organizational design issue, calling for systemic responsibility rather than individual endurance. This perspective is consistent with emerging calls for person-centred and regenerative workplace models that prioritise sustainability of human capacity alongside performance outcomes (Beier et al., 2025).

The implications of this discussion extend beyond employee wellbeing into organizational effectiveness and governance. As psychological resources erode, organizations suffer not only from diminished morale but also from reduced innovation, impaired decision-making, and weakened relational trust. Over time, the illusion of stability maintained through compliance gives way to disengagement, attrition, and reputational damage. Recognizing extraction early, through indicators such as silence, withdrawal, and reduced discretionary effort, becomes a crucial leadership and governance capability.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Psychological Extraction Cycle contributes to organizational literature by integrating conservation of resources theory with psychological safety and experiential organizational analysis. It advances understanding by highlighting how systems, not just demands, actively produce burnout. The framework therefore provides a diagnostic lens through which organizations can identify hidden harm and evaluate whether current practices are extractive or regenerative in nature.

In synthesis, this discussion underscores that sustainable performance cannot be built on sustained psychological depletion. Organizations that continue to prioritize outputs while ignoring the conditions under which those outputs are produced risk long-term erosion of both human and organizational capacity. Breaking the



Psychological Extraction Cycle requires deliberate structural redesign, leadership reflexivity, and the elevation of psychological safety from a cultural aspiration to a core operating principle.

6. Practical and Managerial Implications

The Psychological Extraction Cycle carries significant practical implications for organizational leaders, managers, and governance structures. The findings of this study indicate that many managerial practices inadvertently sustain extractive environments by prioritizing short-term performance indicators while overlooking underlying psychological costs. Addressing extraction therefore requires a fundamental shift in how leaders interpret behavior, design work systems, and define organizational success.

6.1 Reframing Silence and Compliance as Diagnostic Signals

One of the most critical managerial implications of the Psychological Extraction Cycle is the need to reinterpret employee silence, compliance, and reduced resistance. Traditional management frameworks often equate quiet teams with alignment and discipline. However, this study reinforces evidence that silence is more frequently associated with fear, power asymmetry, and low psychological safety than with agreement or engagement (de Lisser et al., 2025). Managers must therefore treat silence not as reassurance but as a diagnostic signal prompting inquiry into environmental conditions.

Practically, this requires leaders to shift from performance-centric interpretation to relational sense-making. Regular reflective forums, psychologically safe feedback mechanisms, and open dialogue structures enable managers to surface unspoken concerns before extraction deepens. Without such mechanisms, organizations risk reinforcing extractive dynamics while remaining blind to emerging dysfunction.

6.2 Embedding Psychological Safety as a Core Leadership Competency

The findings strongly suggest that psychological safety should be elevated from a cultural aspiration to a core leadership and managerial competency. Research consistently demonstrates that psychologically safe environments significantly reduce burnout, enhance learning, and preserve employee wellbeing even under high-pressure conditions (American Psychological Association, 2024; Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024).

From a practical standpoint, managers must be assessed not only on output delivery but also on how they create conditions for safe interpersonal risk-taking. Leadership behaviors such as consistent decision-making, respectful challenge, transparent communication, and error-tolerant learning environments directly shape employees' psychological resource expenditure. Where psychological safety is low, employees divert energy toward self-protection; where it is high, that same energy is redirected toward innovation and collaboration.

6.3 Redesigning Work Systems to Reduce Psychological Load

Another critical implication lies in organizational design. The Psychological Extraction Cycle highlights how excessive monitoring, ambiguous expectations, and digital hyperconnectivity increase psychological load while



reducing autonomy. Evidence from qualitative research on digital work intensity shows that constant surveillance and techno-overload accelerate exhaustion and burnout (Marsh, Perez Vallejos and Spence, 2024).

Managers must therefore critically evaluate whether existing performance systems unintentionally intensify extraction. Practically, this involves clarifying role expectations, rationalizing reporting demands, setting realistic work boundaries, and reducing unnecessary digital intrusion. Managerial discretion is essential in buffering employees from excessive demand escalation, particularly in environments characterized by rapid technological and structural change.

6.4 Shifting from Individual Resilience to Systemic Responsibility

A key managerial implication of this study is the inadequacy of employee-level wellbeing interventions in isolation. While resilience training and wellness programmes may enhance coping capacity, they do not address the systemic conditions driving extraction. The Psychological Extraction Cycle reframes burnout as a predictable response to unsafe systems, reinforcing calls for organizational rather than individual accountability (Bahadurzada, Edmondson and Kerrissey, 2024; Newman, Donohue and Eva, 2023; Frazier et al., 2024).

Managers must therefore move beyond asking how employees can cope better toward examining how work is structured. This requires leadership courage to confront harmful norms, challenge inherited practices, and redesign workflows that continuously deplete psychological resources. Without structural change, wellbeing initiatives risk becoming performative, placing responsibility for survival back onto those most affected by extraction.

6.5 Integrating Psychological Metrics into Governance and Performance Oversight

At a governance level, the findings suggest the need to institutionalize psychological indicators alongside traditional performance metrics. Burnout, disengagement, and turnover are lagging indicators of extraction; psychological safety, voice behavior, and discretionary effort serve as leading indicators. Research shows that organizations monitoring psychological safety gain earlier insight into systemic risk and employee wellbeing erosion (American Psychological Association, 2024).

Practically, boards and senior leadership teams should require regular reporting on psychological safety trends, workload sustainability, and employee voice patterns. Such integration repositions human capacity as a strategic asset rather than an expendable input. For managers, this legitimizes efforts to protect psychological resources as part of performance excellence rather than as a competing priority.

6.6 Developing Regenerative Leadership Practice

Psychological Extraction Cycle calls for a shift toward regenerative leadership practices. Regenerative leadership recognizes that human energy, creativity, and engagement are renewable only when supported by psychologically safe and well-designed systems. This perspective aligns with emerging future-of-work scholarship advocating person-centred organizational models that balance performance with sustainability (Beier et al., 2025).



For managers, this involves adopting reflective leadership practices, engaging in ongoing self-assessment of power and impact, and actively restoring trust where extraction has occurred. Regenerative leaders do not rely on endurance and compliance; they cultivate environments where people can recover, contribute, and grow without fear. Over time, such leadership not only interrupts the Psychological Extraction Cycle but strengthens organizational resilience and long-term effectiveness.

7. CONCLUSION

The Psychological Extraction Cycle offers a powerful lens for understanding how modern workplaces quietly erode human capacity while sustaining the illusion of productivity. Breaking this cycle requires intentional organizational redesign, leadership humility, and the elevation of psychological safety as a core operating principle. Without such transformation, organizations risk long-term erosion of trust, creativity, and performance, the very assets they seek to protect.

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