

Insights Fall Issue 2025: Conceptual Paper

TALES OF WOE: WHACKED-OUT ENVIRONMENTS AND THEIR IMPACTS

Insight into this paper: Since 2020, when the pandemic upended the world's equilibrium, Whacked-Out Environments (WOEs) have actively reshaped our public, private, and working worlds. Customers, employees, consultants, contractors, students, and clients caught in WOE are cracking under the pressure, while fear stymies and silences those without power. This paper describes WOE and sets the foundation for a 3-year research study about the role fear plays in their creation and perpetuation. The paper hypothesizes a potential playbook for how leaders can rebuild their WOE into functional and healthy organizational environments, while acknowledging that research is needed to truly understand how to end this phenomenon. Creating a WOE framework that can be identified, measured, and described could pave the way for a future where WOE are eliminated (i.e., “whacked” out of existence – which could also be appropriately nicknamed *WOE*).

Topics: WOE, whacked-out-environment, quiet cracking, fear as fuel, fight or flight, safety theater, rule fluidity, emotional labor under duress.

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WHACKED-OUT ENVIRONMENTS (WOEs) ARE REAL

Despite widespread institutional promises of care, agility, and resilience, many professionals today report experiences that are increasingly chaotic, untrustworthy, and destabilizing (Bradner, 2025). What appears on the surface as burnout or disengagement often stems from deeper structural breakdowns within the work system. This conceptual paper introduces WOE — the whacked-out environment — as a diagnosable condition in modern organizational life. Unlike temporary dysfunction or poor management, WOE represent a systemic failure to align values with practices, promises with realities, and care with actual conditions. WOE are marked by persistent instability, erosion of trust, and the normalization of fear-based control mechanisms.

This paper presents WOE as more than a metaphor; instead, WOE has become a lived phenomenon, marked with emerging patterns across industries and platforms. The WOE concepts outline a potential framework for a forthcoming series of Delphi studies to identify, rank, and validate WOE indicators, thereby preparing for deeper research into their effects on human performance, organizational legitimacy, and leadership ethics.

WHAT IS A WOE?

WOE describes organizational contexts in which the mechanisms of stability, clarity, and psychological safety have collapsed, yet the performance demands remain unchanged or even intensify. These environments continue to function outwardly while internally generating systemic distress. A 2025 phenomenon, called “quiet cracking” on the LinkedIn platform and business news (Burleigh & Royle, 2025), alludes to this; quiet cracking is more than burnout, less than quitting or coasting, but acts as an actual breakdown in the ability of workers to absorb or handle the abuse, stress, or otherwise debilitating activities they perceive occurring at work. Burleigh and Royle (2025) estimated that quiet cracking may cost employers \$438B in lost



worker outcomes. They attributed quiet cracking to the stress of threats to replace humans with artificial intelligence (AI), lack of career growth, and persistent layoffs.

WOE-based toxicity extends beyond the colloquial sense; in addition to the known issues of bad bosses, discrimination, overwork, lower pay, or stagnant promotional opportunities, these environments also encompass structural incoherence that instills genuine fear. In a WOE, expectations shift without notice, values are expounded but not upheld, and individuals are held accountable within systems that withhold the resources, information, or psychological safety necessary to meet those demands. The resulting tension creates sustained cognitive and emotional dissonance.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF WOES

As with any new acronym-based conceptual framework, the strength of its use lies in the concepts that support it. Unlike SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) or SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound), the acronym WOE does not stand for its concepts – but instead for its phenomenon, similar to SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) or VPN (Virtual Private Network). Thus, the initials WOE will not allow a person to remember its relevant concepts. Potentially, a new acronym could be created that would be definitional and could be a hyphenated addition to WOE. The WOE framework is loosely defined in this conceptual paper. A planned series of Delphi and grounded theory studies will help flesh out the full details of the framework, while ultimately exploring and examining potential solutions. The growth of AI has only just begun – and its potential impact on WOEs must be factored into the exploration. Some of the initial concepts that are seen in WOEs include:

- Lack of Clear Organizational Structure (i.e., matrix management with multiple “dotted lines”).
- Erosion of Career Paths (i.e., overusing interim promotions, restructured shuffling of departments).
- Safety Theater (i.e., optics over ethics)
- Systemic Breakdown of Feedback Loops (i.e., hotlines that go nowhere; townhalls that erupt in terminations for speaking up)
- Rule Fluidity and Retrospective Enforcement (i.e., selectively choosing to enforce obscure or unknown rules as a pretext for terminations and demotions)
- Fear-based Labor Under Duress (i.e., the fight-or-flight [FOF] response)

In September 2025 (reported by Garcia-Navarro), Brené Brown observed that “Fear has a very short shelf life.... to maintain fear as a leadership tool, you have to demonstrate a capacity for cruelty at regular intervals.” Brown warned, “You can’t keep me afraid forever.” Younger generations, in particular, are reluctant to work in fear-driven systems.

Brown’s observation reinforces what this paper defines as the heart of WOE: Fear is a WOE’s catalyst and corrosive agent. While fear is listed last in the bulleted framework, it is the force that breaks employees’ spirits, erodes their loyalty, and undermines their willingness to act. Fear stymies growth, thought, and motivation. Brown’s warning provides hope that tolerance for fear-driven leadership is diminishing – yet it also leads to an urgent question: What happens if fear does not fade, and organizations normalize WOEs?

It is possible that some of the proposed WOE concepts are nested within each other; some could merge after data are collected from multiple perspectives. While these concepts remain

fluid and open to definition, this paper draws on prior scholarship and practitioner-focused observations to support their inclusion, predicting that WOE may become more standard and expected. Brown’s observation supports the need for the planned Delphi study. The study will test whether fear should remain one element of WOE or be elevated as the central mechanism driving the phenomenon.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LIVING WITHIN A WOE

WOE is not confined to a single industry, career level, or organizational type. Reports of its characteristics appear across sectors, including healthcare, education, government, technology, the law, and nonprofit work. One aspect of the WOE research will surround WOE in litigation – where work, law, and conflict intersect to break normality and heighten FOF responses. While litigation has its own environment, attorneys and business owners (i.e., bankers, engineers, mental health professionals, human resource teams, accountants, etc.) whose clients (or themselves) are involved in litigation receive little to no training about how to manage their clients’ fears during litigation. Robert (2025) reported on a Wisconsin judge who has spent years attempting to assist domestic violence victims and now jurors of traumatic cases with their post-litigation fear symptoms. The judge stated that one of the best ways to process trauma is through communication. Yet, professionals receive little education or training on how to communicate effectively when their clients, customers, or employees exhibit or react to fear. Gray lines exist because the attorneys and business owners must also navigate fear during the process, while controlling their clients’ responses and fears. Medical situations, too, have their own elements of fear associated with them. Patients arrive at offices, often in states of fear for their lives, and how medical professionals navigate that can often dictate whether the organizational culture is a WOE or a supportive mechanism for both their patients and staff. Combine litigation and the medical environment, and the case for a WOE becomes extreme.

The government is another WOE. The U.S. government has become so enormous that departments often exist in a state of disarray, where few know who is in charge, and vast amounts of money seem to disappear. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that between 2018 and 2022, the United States lost between \$233B and \$521B annually to fraud. The disparity of the estimate (Δ \$288B) seems worrisome and WOE-worthy. The GAO identified the top defrauded departments as Medicare, Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; Padilla & Ayers, 2025). The concept of structureless seems anathema to the bureaucratization of the government, yet its largess creates a smokescreen of structure hiding unfathomable red tape.

This research line responds to Top et al.’s (2024) FOF research, which showed that competing concepts and inconsistency in research findings “suggest a lack of systematic understanding of how and when emotions, such as anger and fear, influence behaviour in conflict” (p. 3). This lack of understanding raises questions about the concept of FOF. Research on WOE may help confirm or reject the idea of FOF as relevant in the business world. This section attempts to define the listed WOE concepts, while acknowledging they remain fluid and emergent.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURELESSNESS

People need workplace structures to create a sense of meaning, purpose, and focus. These structures can appear as mission statements, value propositions, goals, job descriptions, purpose statements, and other similar items. They allow workers to review and accept the work contract offered as a package deal – something many academics in business management refer to as the “psychological contract” – which serves as a process to create psychological safety (Irai et al., 2025).

Structureless groups have been the focus of previous studies. Foti (2022) explained that biomedical citizen science groups often experience groupthink and hidden power dynamics within structureless groups, echoing what Freeman (1972–3) referred to as the “tyranny of structurelessness.” While Freeman analyzed the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s and Foti studied governance in open science projects, their warnings extend to today’s WOE phenomenon. An overreliance on stakeholder theory, amplified by social media, public overreaction to marketing shifts, and the pendulum swings of power, malaise, and fear, has resulted in WOEs. Yet, WOEs have also become de facto. In the process, mission, vision, and value statements are sidelined, given lip service only, or ignored entirely. Some might argue that this defines a misaligned organization, rather than a structureless one – perhaps misalignment could become a better descriptor for this aspect of a WOE. Answering this question is a research goal.

Freeman (1972–3) warned that structurelessness is “a smoke screen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony [dominance] over others” (p. 152). Even in highly structured organizations, repeated cycles of mergers, acquisitions, rebrandings, and community expansions can blur the boundaries of scope, leading to bespoke, incoherent, and vulnerable governance. Some examples in 2025 included the stripping away of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts – sometimes almost overnight – under the whipsaw of political change. Foti (2022) described these dynamics as “tensions between spontaneity versus bureaucratization and the impacts of this for social change” (p. 4). In her study, one participant noted the gap between *claims* of collective decision-making and the *reality* of “a handful of people making decisions” (p. 7). Others have argued that the creation of diversity departments led to WOEs, which caused the whipsaw reaction. Is this describing structurelessness or misaligned structure? Are they the same?

In formalized organizations, scope expansion occurs both organically and by design. The rise in firm size since the turn of the millennium has created its own tyranny. “Too big to fail” defined the first decade of the 21st century, when U.S. taxpayers bailed out the banking sector. Hoberg and Phillips (2022) found that American firms have expanded in size, scope, and scale, resulting in an inverted form of competition. Scope creep allows these firms to bundle products, raise barriers to entry, and “induce kill zones” that stifle innovation (p. 33) and make success for smaller businesses difficult or impossible. Even so, U.S. small businesses make up 99% of companies and employ nearly 50% of private sector employees; they remain a vital part of our workforce (Ogundipe, 2025) even while mega-corporations force them out of business.

Within the unique aspect of worker-experienced WOE, expansions without structure translate into individualized traumas. Workers are often asked to absorb increased responsibilities without the corresponding pay, title, or authority (Management Consulted, 2024). These nameless promotions come without new job descriptions; workers are regularly being reassigned to unfamiliar departments under managers with whom they have no prior social or professional connection. The result is a widening gap between what is demanded and supported – a hallmark of WOE where instability and betrayal are normalized as “growth.” Within this supposed growth, workers experience loss rather than gain. Their career paths resemble broken sidewalks scattered with trip hazards.

EROSION OF CAREER PATHS

The erosion of normalized career trajectories has emerged as a symptom of WOE. Some of these common patterns appear in the forms of:

- ghost jobs and recruitment fraud (Sabin, 2025)
- interim-job promotions (title or responsibility changes without pay)
- nepotistic hires of unqualified people to attempt to lead more qualified people

- cuts to career development benefits/and mentoring opportunities (Mays, 2025).

The accumulation of these patterns erodes the professional trust infrastructure. Job boards, networking platforms, and internal communication channels now carry more suspicion than support. In WOE, what was once a ladder to advancement increasingly resembles quicksand.

Modern social and business media are beginning to document grassroots recognition of WOE patterns, though without formalized frameworks for measurement or publication. One prominent example is the rise of ghost jobs (organizations post openings they do not intend to fill – often to gather resumes or information about competitors or to create the appearance of financial growth or strength). Mays (2025) noted that this practice has become normalized, with studies reporting that 18–22% of online postings are fake (citing Greenhouse), 81% of recruiters admit to posting them (citing Fast Company), and 40% of companies acknowledged doing so, with 30% admitting at least one active fake posting at the time of reporting (citing ResumeBuilder.com). For workers, these figures explain why fear and disorientation spread so quickly. When a person is promoted but not paid, some call this a *dry promotion* (Management Consulted, 2024). Job postings – whether internal or external – should symbolize possibility and agency. When trust in those options collapses, the scaffolding of normal career progression fails, leaving advancement pathways fractured and uncertain.

SAFETY THEATER (OPTICS OVER ETHICS)

Many examples of optics over ethics have emerged over time, but WOE are making this problem seem almost normalized. Enron was a textbook case (Wilkinson, 2005); its 62-page ethical code reminds us that writing a code and living by it are not the same. The theatrical aspect of such codes creates an ethical trickle-down – leaders violate rules at the top while demanding compliance from below, leaving workers to walk a hypocritical tightrope.

Some other well-documented examples include (Ethena Team, 2025):

- Volkswagen (2015): Emissions data were falsified under leadership pressure, while engineers and employees were expected to play along or remain silent.
- Wells Fargo (2016): Millions of fake accounts were created to meet impossible sales goals, with employees trapped between losing their jobs or violating ethics.
- Theranos (2018 exposure; 2023 sentencing): Staff who questioned the blood-testing technology were silenced or marginalized while leadership promoted a false image of innovation.

A more recent example is Meta, where workers have been terminated for minor infractions such as abusing meal-ticket vouchers (Raval, 2024). At the same time, the company reached a multibillion-dollar privacy settlement, and senior leaders, including COO Sheryl Sandberg, faced sanctions for deleting emails relevant to the investigation (NPR, 2025). King Law (2025) reported that Minnesota will require a warning label on social media platforms as early as 2026 – similar to those on alcohol or tobacco products. Allegations that Meta suppressed research about the harmful effects of its platforms on children’s mental health further illustrate how safety theater operates: harsh enforcement at the bottom, denial and opacity at the top.

SYSTEMIC BREAKDOWN VIOLATING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

Aligned with the safety theater construct is the breakdown of systems. Senge (1990) described feedback loops as a critical component of systems thinking, which he claimed was a requirement for a sustainable, positive-cultured organization. Systems should be the opposite of

structurelessness, until they become optic-based. For example, employees working in matrix-managed organizations may have three bosses and report to upwards of five to 10 managers. While the structure in place indicates these dotted lines on the process map, the reality for a worker is that daily life may involve having multiple deadlines on unrelated projects with competing managers who are unaware of the individual's workload. Thus, systems break down into structureless anarchy.

In De Bruijn's (2021) review of literature about toxic work environments, she wondered how the entire organization can become "deviant" as a working system. She cites three possibilities from previous studies: abusive supervision, bad managers, and dysfunctional employees (Chapter 44, p. 1). She also identified a gap in the literature regarding the definition of a toxic work environment, noting that its factors remain unknown, loosely defined, and fragmented. Porter et al. (2024) highlighted workplace toxicity within healthcare as a significant concern. They relied on "system justification theory" to explain how a desire for the status quo allows workplace toxicity to become and remain embedded in organizational culture. Using this theory, systems thinking is distorted by individuals who seek to justify inequitable or problematic systems, especially if the systems benefit them personally or if they are not the primary target of the problem.

System justification theory should be viewed as a systemic breakdown, rather than a functioning system. Porter et al. (2024) attributed negative, not positive, factors to those who justify toxic systems. People who see bullying (but are not being bullied) fear having the bullying turned on them. Workers with low control, who are dependent on the system (i.e., need their job), or find the situation inescapable, all contribute to the justification tactics. This "go along to get along" mindset is often found in union workers, faculty in education, and on the lines where the "work actually happens."

Irai et al. (2025) stated that "meaningful communication" between employers and employees is required to have psychological safety and that a "systemic failure" results from a "lack of transparency," which removes trust (p. 89). They commented that powerless groups who face greater potential damage, such as migrant workers, often work in WOE, with little ability to get free of the situation. Two types of psychological contracts exist: transactional and relational. Transactional psychological contracts refer to how an employee perceives their pay, job security, and work environment, whereas the relational psychological contract is a requirement for creating a trusting, loyal, and emotionally supportive workforce. In WOE, both types of psychological contracts are broken in some way, and often, the relational aspect of the psychological contract is more than broken – it is often shattered. Irai et al. noted that when relational psychological contracts are nonexistent, management's role becomes entirely task-focused, focusing only on what tasks employees can or do carry out, rather than on who the employees are and how the tasks requested impact their well-being. Work-life balance is not considered important or even desired. In Irai et al.'s study, bus drivers perceived that their supervisors "lack appropriate interpersonal skills," saying, "I don't think supervisors care..." (p. 87). In WOE, supervisors often do not care, and in fact, may even go so far as to tell their employees that they do not care about them as individuals.

RULE FLUIDITY AND RETROSPECTIVE ENFORCEMENT

While seeming like the Safety Theater concept, Rule Fluidity is a bit different. Along with surface-only ethics, in a WOE, rules are often used as weapons to punish those who fall out of favor with leaders or belong to an ostracized group. For example, punishing an employee with a rule no one ever follows occurs in WOE, both to control that employee but also to create a fearful atmosphere for anyone witnessing the punishment. In a healthy environment, common sense prevails and avoids the problem of literal application of rote rules, creating worse scenarios than having no rules.

While both Safety Theater and Rule Fluidity break the trusting relationship needed to re-establish a healthy culture, Rule Fluidity creates an arbitrary and manipulative environment. An example of this is also evident when one employee can ignore ethical rules, but others have them enforced against them. WOE exists in organizations where people who call out bad behavior are themselves punished or ridiculed, whereas bad actors are not. This often occurs in educational facilities when faculty face punishment or lose opportunities for enforcing academic integrity rules, or when they are verbally instructed to overlook students' misbehaviors, such as cheating or bullying, while the written guidelines for enforcement remain in place. Managers who fudge expense reports but who fire employees who park in the customer lot are another example of rule fluidity behavior within a WOE.

FEAR-FUELED EMOTIONAL LABOR

At the core of WOE is fear, as both an emotional experience and a design principle. In healthy systems, fear arises in response to acute actual challenges, such as an impending bankruptcy of the organization or a hurricane that threatens the lives of everyone in the organization's building. These fears have reality-based grounding. In WOE, fear is chronic, ambiguous, and baked into everyday functioning. Fear responses trigger the body's fight, flight, freeze, or fawn (FFOF) reactions. Cannon invented the concept of FOF in 1915 and described it as a "progressive degree of threat and corresponds to progressive states of anxiety, fear, and panic" (Raffa et al., 2024, p. 3667). Garrison et al. (2025) noted that during FOF states, only ~60% of brain capacity is available, resulting in deterioration of reasoning and decision-making, a spike in cortisol levels, impaired emotional regulation, and a reduction in the ability to encode new information. These are adaptive responses to unsafe systems. Toxic leaders, however, turn them into character flaws, calling them out publicly when an employee shows signs of cracking and using public shame to supercharge the ultimate empowerment through bystander buy-in. Fear becomes the operating system of WOE. Fear is both a cause and effect of WOE, and it empowers the leaders who adeptly use it to gain personal rewards but destroy organizational culture and sustainability.

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS TO WOE

In traditional organizational theory, psychological safety is considered a foundational concept. In WOE systems, safety is simulated and performative. Safety theater mimics the language of support while withholding the structural guarantees. When individuals experience a disconnect between the promised safety and the lived risk, it constitutes a breach of the psychological contract – the unspoken agreement between the employee and the employer. This leads to fear, a triggering of FOF, and thus, a workforce operating at 60% or less capacity (Garrison et al., 2025).

RESEARCH NEEDS

While Irai et al. (2025) discussed broken psychological contracts and a lack of psychological safety, their description of the work environments in their research sounded very WOE-like. Their call for research included ways to proactively reinforce psychological safety through systemic reforming of how work "works." Studying the successful strategies of leaders who understand these concepts and how to prevent WOEs is necessary to learn more about what works. This paper seeks to open that doorway. Park et al. (2025) noted that nurses often work in toxic work environments and experience high levels of turnover, which negatively impacts patients and the public when there are insufficient numbers of nurses available. Their study reviewed psychological contract breach as a specific act that led to a worker deciding to leave an organization. They explained psychological contract breaches through the lens of expectancy violation theory, which posits that unexpected events trigger a more significant response.

In WOE, it could be argued that the expectancy violation theory does not apply – WOE are awful because, while being awful, they have become ingrained, and people begin to expect the awfulness. Further, because WOE are awful, individuals working there are less invested in the organization (disloyalty and distrust abound). Park et al. (2025) stated that expectancy violation theory applies when unexpected negative events occur – not expected ones – and that having a sense of investment leads to a greater sense of betrayal in response to those events. A WOE creates what might be seen as a Stockholm syndrome effect at work. The constant flip-flopping, hypocrisy, and unfair activities create a long-term fear of stating the obvious: that this workplace is not working. Yet, people identify with their job and their work, and for a while, do *more*, not less, because of their fear. As Brown mentioned in her interview (Garcia-Navarro, 2025), however, this fear-induced performance goes only so far. An example from government includes the Summer 2025 firings, rehiring, and rehiring loops that occurred with the Department of Governmental Efficiency in the United States (Bradner, 2025). For the employees caught in the loop, their work lives epitomize a classic WOE. In October 2025, a continuation of this WOE emerged after the United States Congress failed to pass the budget, leading to government worker layoffs, firings, reductions, and airport woes and WOE.

Dickson and Isaiah (2024) noted that to end a toxic work environment, “a safe work environment” (p. 183) must be established. This seems self-evident, yet so many organizations are WOE that there must be another missing link to the phenomenon. Does being a WOE lead to greater profits? Do WOE eventually crash? Do we know? A big part of WOE-status is that what is happening inside them is private, hidden, ignored, or lied about – by their nature, the leaders of WOE gaslight everyone (which includes shareholders, stakeholders, employees, customers, and communities). Perhaps these leaders are even gaslighting themselves.

DELPHI AND WOE

The Delphi method is ideal for defining emerging constructs like WOE. This process will engage a panel of practitioners and experts across sectors to validate and refine the conceptual indicators introduced in this paper.

Preliminary indicators include:

- Policy decisions reversed without acknowledgment
- Loyalty performances expected under duress
- Feedback systems that penalize dissent
- Praise preceding job elimination
- Remote work policies are inconsistently enforced
- Unclear or shifting authority structures
- Fearful co-workers, employees, customers, clients, patients, students, or other stakeholders

Overall, WOE exist in all industries and extend beyond the employees. Customers who hire companies with WOE are often harmed when employees with knowledge of their project or needs leave the organization, or when leaders are unaware of their employees’ promises or behaviors. Disgruntled employees often create disgruntled customers and clients. Learning more about the extent of the WOE will be part of a 3-year project that will involve exploring and then examining the perceptions and experiences of multiple participants. Finding and disseminating solutions for people living and working in WOE is a major goal of the project.



FINAL INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

Besides creating awareness of the problem, the study will attempt to do the following things: identify the constructs that create a WOE; explore strategies successful leaders use to prevent WOEs from occurring; analyze the impacts of WOEs on clients, customers, employees, and the community; and structure a potential solution set or practical recommendations. Then, publishing those findings will be imperative.

Finally, and importantly, the goal of WOE is not self-help. It is system-help. Where popular leadership literature often turns inward, asking individuals to focus on themselves (e.g., to “find a growth mindset” or to “lean in”), the WOE framework turns outward. The goal is to teach leaders, lawyers, engineers, managers, and practitioners how to recognize fear in others, name it, and respond in ways that restore stability and safety. While psychological aspects may be part of the project, the goal is to create a layperson’s playbook, rather than an academic treatise, which could significantly enhance workplace culture and reduce toxicity. This work may help support and strengthen individual resilience as a side effect, but its primary purpose is to guide leaders in dismantling environments that necessitate resilience in the first place. The plan for the WOE research studies is to provide a final, conceptual framework that helps others through research, language, and practical strategies, aiming to prevent fear from being weaponized and to foster cultures where people can thrive.

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