A woman with blonde hair, wearing a white blazer, is sitting at a desk. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Strategic Survival Guide for HRs Dealing with a Toxic CEO

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This advanced guide merges psychological insight with real-world tactics. Designed for HR professionals navigating toxic executive environments, it provides you with deep understanding and high-impact tools.

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# Understanding the Toxic CEO: Behaviors and Beliefs

## Observable Behaviors

- Micromanagement to maintain control over people and outcomes
- Emotional volatility, often using anger or coldness to dominate
- Public shaming or sarcasm used to assert superiority
- Undermining others' initiatives unless they originate the idea
- Encouraging internal rivalry to divide and rule

## Core Beliefs & Values (with real impact)

- Belief: 'Control equals power.' → Refuses to delegate or empower others
- Belief: 'Vulnerability is weakness.' → Rejects feedback, even when constructive
- Belief: 'Loyalty is more important than competence.' → Keeps unqualified allies and punishes challengers
- Belief: 'Success must be visible and attributed to me.' → Manipulates metrics and monopolizes recognition

# The Psychology Behind Toxic Leadership

## Deep-Seated Fears (decoded + illustrated)

- Fear of irrelevance → Constantly seeks visibility and centrality in decisions
- Fear of exposure → Aggressively defends ego, even at the cost of truth
- Discomfort with ambiguity → Micromanages to soothe their inner chaos
- Inability to trust → Isolates themselves and creates a 'me vs. them' leadership stance

## Hidden Needs Behind the Mask (and how they show up)

- Need for validation → Demands credit even for others' contributions
- Need for psychological safety → Controls everything to feel secure
- Need to feel superior → Constantly compares and diminishes others subtly
- Need for control → Blocks change initiatives unless tightly framed around their narrative

Understanding these psychological drivers helps HR professionals recognize that toxic behaviors often stem from deep insecurities rather than malicious intent, providing a foundation for strategic intervention.

# Direct Interaction Strategies with the CEO

Below are layered tactics: what to do, why it works, and how to apply it with subtle authority.



Use neutral, non-threatening language

e.g. Instead of 'That's a problem', try: "What has worked well in the past we could expand on?"



Mirror their ego while guiding toward insight

e.g. "I can see your high standards here—what would excellence look like from the team's side?"



Anchor in business logic, not emotion

e.g. "This misalignment is impacting strategic execution—shall we explore mitigation?"

# Cultural Influence and Psychological Resilience

## Cultural Influence from the Side

- Empower mid-level leaders with visible micro-wins
- Create informal peer learning groups around 'what works here'
- Use pilots to introduce better models subtly
- e.g. Introduce a feedback tool in one department, then present results in metrics
- Document culture shifts in a business case format

## Psychological Resilience & Inner Clarity

- Detach from the CEO's emotional tone—don't mirror their volatility
- Use daily reset practices (journaling, mindfulness, re-grounding walks)
- Anchor yourself in your core leadership values
- e.g. If 'dignity' is a value, choose words that protect others in every situation
- Affirm your long-term professional vision during moments of chaos
- e.g. 'I'm building a reputation as a strategic HR leader regardless of temporary noise.'

# High-Impact Language & Framing Tools

## Solution-Focused Questions

- 'What would be the first small sign that this is improving?'
- 'What has worked before—even a little?'

## Ericksonian Language

- Metaphor: 'Every crew hits storms. What matters is how we steer.'
- Embedded command: 'When you refocus the team, clarity tends to follow.'

## Subtle Change Levers (Positive Influence Over Time)



### Facilitate reflection

e.g. 'Would it be useful to explore how other high-impact CEOs align teams quickly?'



### Use inspiring stories

e.g. Share anonymized examples of successful leadership evolution in similar contexts



### Introduce small changes

e.g. 'This tool helped another leadership team gain clarity on priorities in 30 minutes.'



### Build internal momentum

Align informal leadership around positive practices and track early results visibly



# Strategic Exit Plan (Empowerment, Not Escape)

Having an exit strategy doesn't mean leaving. It means restoring your power to choose. A well-prepared Plan B increases confidence and peace of mind.

## Update Your Professional Portfolio

Update your resume, LinkedIn, and reference list

## Identify Aligned Opportunities

Identify roles or industries aligned with your values and skillset

## Set Assessment Milestones

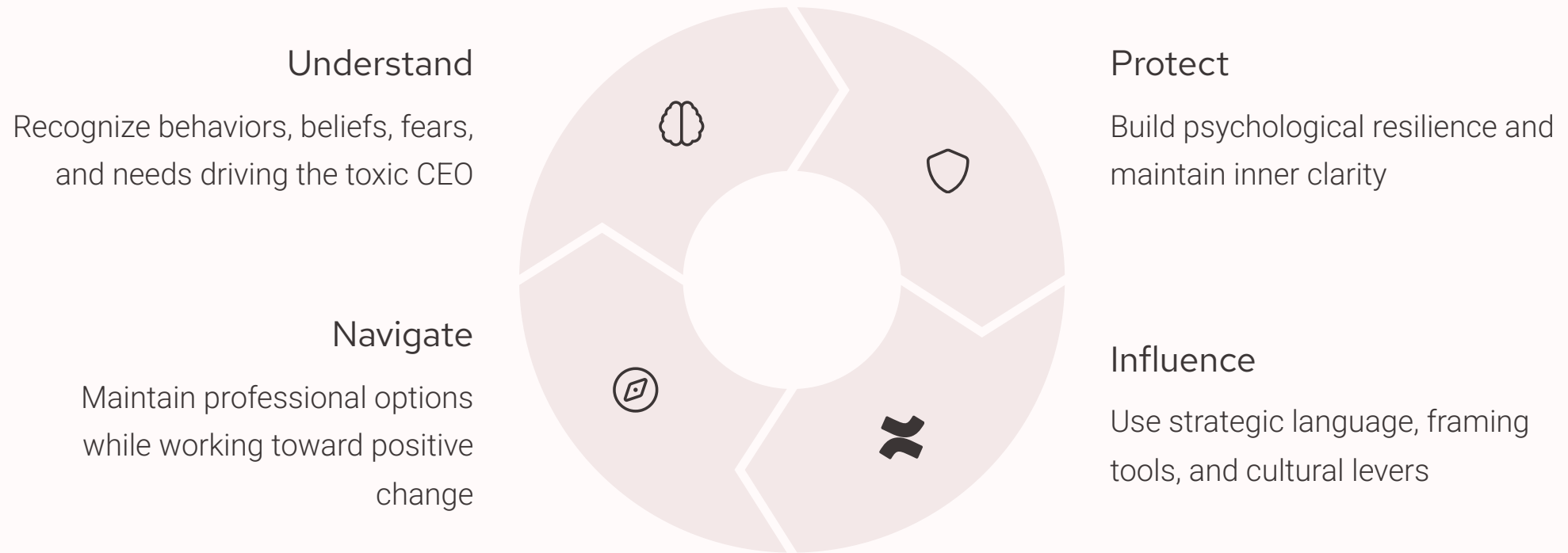
Set a personal check-in milestone (e.g. every 3 or 6 months) to reassess alignment

## Explore Market Value

Explore your market value quietly and strategically

Remember: clarity about your options gives you calm presence in every meeting.

# Putting It All Together: The Strategic HR Approach



This comprehensive approach enables HR professionals to maintain their effectiveness and wellbeing while working to transform toxic leadership dynamics. By combining psychological insight with practical tactics, you can navigate these challenging environments with greater confidence and impact.